

I must change something about my life, I think, and for the first time in ages I hang up my coat on the rack instead of tossing it over the back of a chair. I pick up the newspaper and plop down on the couch, even though I'm too tired to read. I flip the pages distractedly and my eyes land on a bold printed advertisement: TAE KWON DO FOR WOMEN, MONDAYS AND WEDNESDAYS 7-9:00 P.M.

It's just what I needed right now: a martial arts class, working out, meeting new people. Within the week I have begun training with five other new women.

Sunny is more than just my Tae Kwon Do instructor. From the first instant, she makes me feel welcome. I can hardly believe any white person, but especially one I've just met, could offer me so much consideration and respect. Until now, I've always had to prove myself to people. With Sunny, I don't feel the need to prove that I'm just as good, just as capable, just as weak or strong, or just as likeable as my white sisters. She demands the utmost from me in class. She pushes me to train harder and overcome my self-imposed limits to open myself to new energy, not to give up, to focus, to believe in myself and my abilities.

There are twenty-five women in the training at the school, and the atmosphere is one of friendly open-mindedness. I am the only black woman, but I encounter no racism, neither tacit nor overt. I don't know what the other women think of me or whether they know other blacks. The entire tone of the place is set by Sunny's personality and her insistence that there is no place for racism, sexism, or discrimination of any sort in Tae Kwon Do training. All the women treat one another—and even me—with tolerance and respect. The school is an entirely positive place for me. I'm learning the art of Tae Kwon Do. Remarkably, I'm doing it in an environment where racism is not inherent.

I am overjoyed to be in training at this school and to have Sunny as a teacher, even if I sometimes rebel against the training, grow angry, and feel that Sunny is too harsh. She knows my limits better than I do. Every class, she extracts a little more will power or persistence from me. She teaches me that self-knowledge—my own awareness of my strengths, the language of my own body, and how I hold myself—is far more important than any other quality anyone has ever attributed me. Everyday, Tae Kwon Do changes my life. I learn not only to take myself seriously as an opponent, a combatant, but to demand respect while fighting. These are lessons I will carry with me throughout the rest of my life.



In time, Sunnny and I also become close friends. One night, after class, she hands me a newspaper clipping, an article about the first-ever national gathering of Afro-Germans, which will be taking place in the near future, right here in Frankfurt. Afro-Germans? What kind of word is that? I tell myself I'm not interested and toss the paper in the trash can. Why would I want anything to do with "people of my own kind?" There's no way I'm going to that meeting. I'm not prepared to give up my anonymity. Why should I make myself visible all of a sudden, for whom? I don't want to look into "Afro-German" faces and see more of my own pain. I'm far too afraid of reliving all I've worked so hard to put behind me, and my hatred of the color of my skin far outweighs any desire I might have to meet other Afro-German men and women.

I'm used to this life, to being excluded, to being different, to being angry, to the fact that my very existence is considered improper by the majority of Germans. My own understanding of injustice has thus far sufficed to ensure my survival. I'm not ready—not yet—to join a community of people like myself. I don't want to hear what they have to say and I don't want to deal with their pain, which is all too likely the same pain I have experienced.

I'm used to being in conflict with whites, and therefore I find that state of conflict less threatening than the possibility that I might come into conflict with other blacks. I know whites will never change, but at least this provides me with a certain security—I know what to expect.

Then about six months later, I receive a completely unexpected phone call from an Afro-German woman who invites me in a friendly, warm voice to another gathering of Afro-Germans. I decide on the basis of her call that I'll do it—I'll go meet these Afro-Germans.

I'm getting my things together, getting ready to leave the apartment just as I would any other day, having finished my coffee before going to a meeting, to Tae Kwon Do, to a party, to a reading. But today I'm a little nervous—I'm on my way to meet the Afro-German group. I don't trust myself. I'm not sure that I really want to take up all the issues of racism and being black or to enter into dialogue about them with other blacks.

I leave the house and don't let myself stop moving the whole way there, lest I lose my momentum and turn back around. Twenty minutes later, I walk into an apartment where there are already twelve other Afro-Germans. They welcome me warmly.

"We're so glad you came."

One woman even tells me: "I'm so glad you exist."

And then, "Come on, let's sit down and eat. We all want to hear how things are going for everyone."

I am speechless.

## A Dream is Over

Scraps of dreams and daydreams rise  
up in my body.

Dreamdances. As if there were a light brightening the space around me.

I am not black, not white,

I am permeable, transparent.

It startles me when I realize everyone can see me.

Exhausted, I lean back against a wall

and let my body collapse.

I'm glowing—and through this sensation of welcome and arrival, I look into faces that mirror my own.

I close my eyes and consider the eternity

that lies between my longing and my loneliness. I am tempted and want to go toward them,

just a bit closer.

My fear creeps up over my shoulders,  
and I look at my brown hands.

I want to call out,

"I need hands, your brown hands."

But the merest touch would cause my body  
to shatter.

My breathing grows quiet.

We meet every week, talk on the phone, take care of each other. I am moved by the experience and at first I don't really understand what is happening to me. I leave each meeting intoxicated, and it takes half the week for me to come back down to Earth. I don't know what's more unbelievable—the thirty-nine years in which I lived in total isolation, never seeing a black face that wasn't my own, or the fact that now, suddenly I'm not alone anymore. I now see that I've always compared myself to whites and have almost uniformly judged them to be better, superior in every pursuit, worthier of respect, preferable. After all, they hadn't questioned themselves every day of their lives. Now that I've met other Afro-Germans, I see for the first time that differences can unite people, not just divide them. We acknowledge each others' strengths and weaknesses, and not just as a collective—each and everyone of us does it him or herself, in his or her own way. The color of our skin and our common struggle to survive create a bond between us that we never felt among whites.

I'm not all by myself at the edge of this world anymore. I belong to a group that wants me to belong. Our meetings are characterized by mutual respect and attentiveness. Survival is no longer a question of strength or pride; it is a decision.

Step by step I begin to discover who I am. In the meetings with my brothers and sisters, I am set free from the self-doubt and pain—some of which



is on the surface, some of which has long been buried—that whites created in me and ultimately trained me to feel, all the while accusing me of hypersensitivity. I am able to believe in myself, to take myself seriously and to unlearn much of what whites have taught me. I even begin to love myself, my skin color, everything that I am—but slowly, carefully. Every time I repossess a part of my heart or my body, it hurts. And finally, I discover that I can love myself as well as my brothers and sisters.

With my newly won self-assurance there also comes a sense of indignation and outrage. I am enraged with all those who have shirked responsibility for what I've endured, with all those who did not want me to survive. I should not have to strive to be acknowledged or wanted. Never again will I stand politely by while people look down on me. I will no longer trust the type of person who, having just hurt me with their words or attitudes, then bursts into tears because they can't take my pain or my anger at them. They caused that anger. I'm no longer troubled by the possibility that whites will distance themselves from me if I don't believe in a manner they expect. I've struggled long enough without any support from those people, and I survived it, but I'm not going to fight against myself anymore.

As long as I don't know what I want, others will decide for me. As long as I don't define myself, others will. As long as I don't know who I am, others will try to tell me who I ought to be. My mother thought Erika was a beautiful name, the most beautiful name she could give me, and till now I've always liked it. But I decide that from here on out I will call myself Ika. Almost everyone else does, too.

## May Ayim Vatersuche

als ich dich brauchte  
hielt ich das bild an der wand  
für wahr  
das schönste was ich von dir hatte  
und das einzige

du warst  
wie ich dich wünschte  
ernst und klug und zart. unendlich zart.

von angesicht zu angesicht  
traf mich dein augenblick  
ernst und klug und kalt. bitterkalt.  
wortlos hab ich das bild

erhängt  
das den traum vom vater mir  
träumte  
zartbitter der abschied

ich gehe und staune

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## May Ayim Father Seeking

when I needed you  
I held the picture on the wall  
to be true  
the most beautiful thing I had from you the only thing

you were  
as I wished you to be  
serious and smart and tender, infinitely tender.

face to face  
your glance caught me  
serious and smart and cold, bitter cold.  
without words

I hung the picture  
that dreamed for me  
a dream of father  
bittersweet the parting

I go and wonder

Translated by Anne V. Adams