
B(L)EACHED

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by Brandon S. Graham
Illustrated by Mister Koppa & Friends

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I could trace the path of my childhood by trailing a finger over a map's dry surface. Starting from a modest ranch, part of off-base housing, in Newport News, Virginia. Sliding my finger south I could pass it over six homes along the Atlantic Coast in the Carolinas, Georgia and eventually end in a spot down south of Miami, where the land stops. That is where we settled near my mom's family.



My first lungfull of air was filled with the scent of the sea. When just big enough to walk, I remember looking down at my cherubic toes in hot sand. Up en pointe I punched holes in the beach. Chubby feet balled to catch the grit and hold it, to grasp the new sensation and not let it loose. The wind blasted grains and mist against me. A wet line of foam surged up the beach toward me, sweeping sudden and cold over my feet. Later my cloth diaper, heavy with seawater, came loose, the weight bending the safety pins until they popped and gouged a red, angry line down my thigh. My parents and big sister laughed at my nudity and I was happy.



After college, I rebounded like a kid's cheap yo-yo, drawn one state at a time back along the coastline until I married and built an academic life outside our nation's capital. My grandmother Daisy passed away last semester, and as the most responsible living relative, I'm flying down on my sabbatical to tie up a few loose ends, liquidate a few assets and pay some outstanding bills. Plus, my wife and I needed the break.



I don't keep a resume. Hell, now that I'm tenured I barely even keep my CV up to date. But I know CV is short for Curriculum Vitae, which is Latin for course of life. And that's what's on my mind as I feel the jet engines slow, feel my stomach drop.



Out the window, as we swing in a wide turn around Miami, I see Biscayne Bay. I was here in '82 when Christo and Jeanne-Claude ringed the islands down there with Pepto-Bismol® colored plastic sheeting, like some grotesque halo, or a misguided, gaudy Shinto celebration of nature. Supposedly it killed a lot of pelicans. They dove in whole flocks to catch fish in their bucket mouths and came up under the plastic to suffocate, their corpses grisly additions to the exhibition. At least that's what I heard back then.

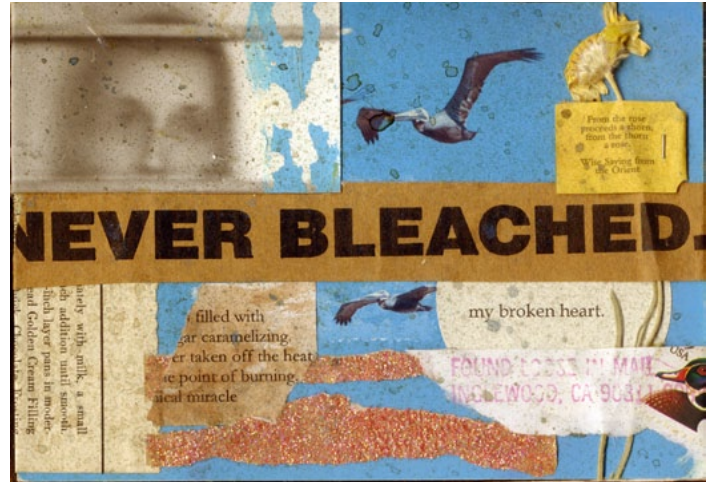
My rental car takes me down roads whose names I should know, past sights that used to be familiar, commonplace. It's funny how memory works. The shiny, happy, bright images of a ten-year-old are dulled with layers of failed responsibility and pessimistic attitudes about consumerism and tainted politics. The color leaches out of everything given enough time. Or maybe my eyes are just tired.



In Homestead, where I attended grade school, I stop at a wide spot next to the road to buy two avocados, a mango and three oranges from a Cuban man with boxes of fruit lined up on a card table. I sit on the hood of my car and pitch strips of orange peel into the tall grass. The sticky, sweet juices run into my whiskers while the sun bakes my forehead. Seagulls cry out overhead and catch the air in their wings as they glide into an adjacent parking lot. From above, the rising waves of heat coming off the flat surface must have looked like deep, dark water. I watch them squawk in protest, hop around and peck through the gravel for food. Soon they give up and take back to the sky. I take their lead and drive on toward the fish camp.



The strip of road that leads to Key Largo has beach on both sides. In the shallows off to the right a flock of flamingos stand on one leg. I've been told flamingos have white feathers. Their usual distinctive pink coloring comes from the red algae in their diet. This flock bothers me. They are faded and pale. Not the flamboyant, vivid birds I remember.



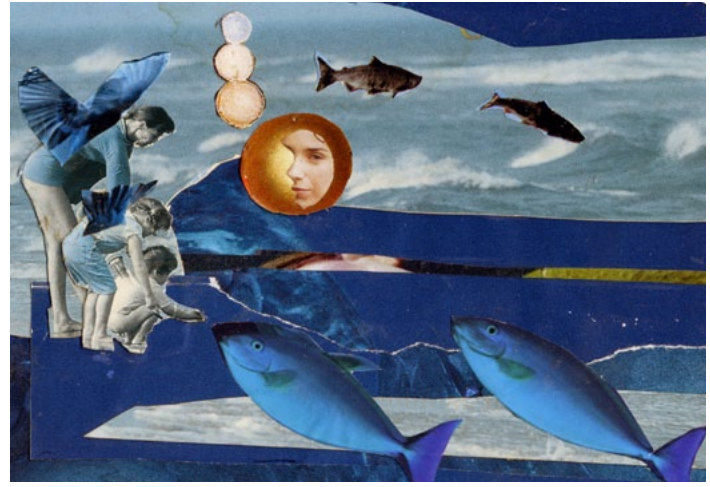
The last time I saw my grandmother alive was at my grandfather's funeral, years ago. She'd gotten arthritis so bad her hands were like a knot of white root vegetables. She'd given-up on planting the flowers she'd always loved so much and had instead stuffed cheap plastic flamingos into each of the terra-cotta pots that lined her little porch. When she hugged me the last time, she'd had strength left in her arms, nearly crushed me.



I'm mostly here to clean out an old storage unit where my grandparents kept some things after Andrew did its damage and the insurance company shafted them. Their house had stucco the color of guacamole and had big white awnings that folded down like protective metal wings over the louvered windows in a hurricane. Andrew had stripped half the roof off and then filled the house with storm water and palm fronds. The gators ventured from their canals around the citrus groves and swam in the flooded streets. After things dried out my grandfather Jan found a big one that had made a nest between his two mangled banana trees. By that time it was clear they were abandoning the house, so he left the back door open in case the gator needed anything amid the moldy carpets and swollen floorboards.



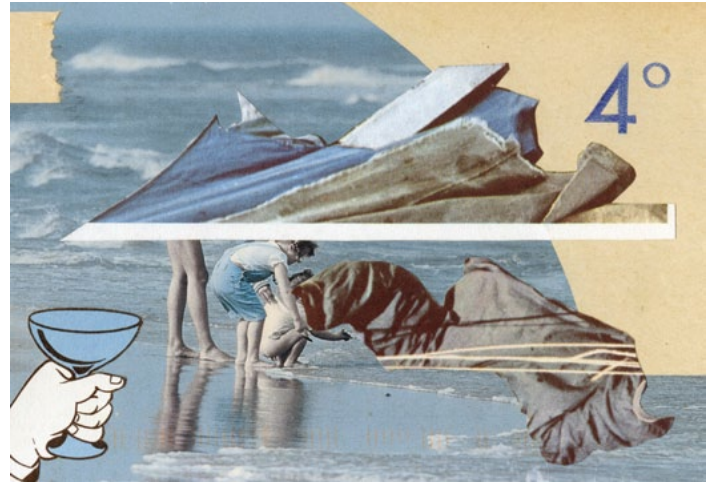
The fish camp is at the far end of Key Largo and consists of a series of cinder block cabins facing the sea, a long pier to stand and fish from, a place where the charter boats come to pick up guests, and a narrow stretch of beach, baby dunes, and ragged sea grass. The exterior of the cabins are each a different color. The woman at the office hands me the key and tells me I'm staying in the Honeydew suite. After I unpack, I sit at a picnic table near an abandoned fire pit and eat slices of ripe mango in the dark as the wind comes off the water. I take out my cell phone to call my wife, the light is harsh in the night, and bugs immediately start to gather. I slip the phone back in my pocket. I know she doesn't want to hear from me.



In his retirement my grandfather Jan had loved two things, and neither of them was his wife Daisy. The first was a sky blue T-bird convertible. He always claimed he couldn't drive it in the spring with the top down because the over-sized mosquitoes were drawn to its color and would cover it so thick it looked like its hood had been flocked black. Neither could he find the heart to sell it, even when his cataracts were too bad to drive. The other was his Slash2 BMW motorcycle. After drinking black coffee on the pier as the sun came up, I find them both in the storage unit just off Truman Avenue near the tip of Key West. It only takes me two days to sell the T-bird for more money than I expected. I use the cash to pay Daisy's remaining bills and to have the BMW tuned-up and purchase new tires, a new battery, and fresh spark plugs.



That takes a few days so I visit the Hemingway Museum, eat fresh seafood and fresh fruit, and drink too many girly drinks with ridiculous umbrellas. I feel ashamed, like Papa Hemingway would never make me a tragic hero in his next book. As the sun sets on my fourth night I walk along the beach and people watch. Little children play in the surf, tossing a Frisbee into the ocean and watching it wash back to them. An older couple walk together, shoulders touching and a metal detector skimming the sand in front of them. A bald woman in a see-through dress carries a big bottle of Champagne in one hand and a glass that she keeps refilling in the other. She walks toward me. As I watch without appearing to watch, she un-slings her oversized purse, and like a magic act, a white dog hops out. She leans over drunkenly to let the enchanted canine drink from her glass. Then she fills it again and we all part ways.



That night I build a fire and sort through musty boxes of papers from the storage unit. Old family photos of people I don't recognize. There are several black and white images of my grandparents as a young couple on a beach, her hair light from the sun. There is one snapshot of them rolling in the surf like a staged press photo to promote that Pearl Harbor movie From Here to Eternity. They looked happy, giggling too much to give a serious kiss. I slowly burn everything but one stack of pictures, a few faded postcards like you'd find on a wire spin-rack, a leather motorcycle jacket in reasonable shape, and a decrepit helmet with goggles that probably isn't DOT certified.



I drive the rental car back to the lot where I got it. I walk into the airport and tell lies about a family emergency to three different people until I'm refunded the majority of my return ticket. I spend nearly a third of the refund to take a cab back down to the garage where the bike is waiting.



I'm cautious for the first few miles, feeling out the breaks, the heavy boxer engine sticking out of either side of the frame like nubby wings. But it doesn't take long before it feels like an old friend. I stop at a roadside stand that sells Cuban coffee and sandwiches. I knock back the coffee, put the sandwich in my saddlebag for later. I text my wife, instead of calling. I can't imagine enough time has passed for her to want to speak to me, the pain of my hurtful confession still too sharp. But I want her to know I'm coming home. I'm taking the long way up old coast roads. Taking my time, letting the wind ease the sharp edges and the sun beat on me until the garish colors fade to white.



Colophon

B(l)eached is the sequel to *Thaw(ing)*; *Thaw(ing)* the child of *Thawt*.

Far away from home with a want to slow down, I spotted a rack of postcards in the motel office window. To my great pleasure, the owner of The Falcon Motel in Buxton, North Carolina, gave me a great deal on a dozen, some faded from the sun, and that was the moment of conception. The cards which were sent as invitations to my new friends—the contributors to *Thawt*—for another round of collaboration. Many thanks to Peter Hornby for permission to use the photographs on the original postcards; to the contributing artists for their cooperation; and to Brandon Graham, for jumping right in and writing a story inspired by the sequence of photographs, original post-cards, and collages reproduced in this book.

Set in Open Sans Extrabold and Light. Twenty-six copies of this title have been privately published as a limited edition, hand bound in the heat of July, and lettered A through Z.