

Notes on Hands or Notes on The Black Barbershop

What cannot be overstated is the intimacy of it. How I spend at least 30 minutes at the mercy of Phil, whom I know only by what he is willing to disclose—sometimes that is a gripe about his wife’s inability to compromise, other times it’s his hope that the Raiders will finally have an above .500 season, the rest of the time I am at the mercy of what his hands are capable of.

During the haircut, I point my head towards the ground more often than not to allow Phil to do his thing and since my head is mostly down, I am often only able to make out the geography of the shop by the slew of shoes peeking out of the bottom of the capes we’re fitted in: Nike slides, white socks. Jordan thirteens or *Bred 13s*. Crocks. Crocks. Different style of Crocks. Converse, low tops. My favorites are the steel-toe boots. They always seem more genuine, more honest in what they’ve been through and what they came to do—dirt and paint smeared across the front of them.

By the time I am able to raise my head, I have already gotten to know everyone from their feet. I confirm the steel-toe boot client is usually asleep, save for the art of him positioning his head as the barber moves it. Like power-steering. The machine helps, but the hands do the work.

Clients share conversation across the small shop about who the GOAT rapper is and how it must be Lil Wayne because of his run during the early 2000’s, while others speculate Jay-Z because of his longevity—a youngster isn’t taken seriously when he tosses Playboi Carti into the mix—two, much older clients began a side-conversation about how none of us has any idea what we’re talking about and how Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five and Funky 4 +1 *had the functions live back in the day* and now it’s its own conversation thread and hanging above our

conversations, the barbers chuckle about an inside joke from two days ago and there isn't a synergy more golden than this one.

By the time Phil takes the top down using a one and a half guard *with the grain* because one must preserve one's waves, I have sunk into the seat. He removes the guard just as I remove my guard and he begins to use the lever to start on the fade. Because of the violent intersection of patriarchy and Black male archetype, we don't let our guards down often. It's in our best interests to be on the offensive. At least that's what I believed most of my life. In the shop, amongst the mess of guards lining the barber's trays, we are soft, slow and vulnerable. All eight of us in Black capes eager to be made new again, *whole* even. All of us surrender to the knowledge of our barber's hands. The barber's hands spin the chair in seemingly arbitrary yet calculated ways. Back one direction before sending it the other way. Clicking the trimmers on and off between each spin. Pumping the chair. We rise higher and higher.

Phil's hands gently pressing my temple the direction he wants me to go, while the off-hand illustrates the story jittering out his mouth in spurts between strokes. Hands moving as if they're holding a wand.

There is a moment where he puts the guards away and it's just me, his hands and his close gaze. Near the end of the cut, when it's time for the *edge up*. The three minutes that make or break the cut. The conversation halts. My face is still and Phil's hands are steady. Stern. Yet fluid, the way a Magician's are. Or a God. My God. There is a geometry to be had.

Phil spins me to face him while he lowers his chin to see my whole face more intently. Sometimes he even crouches or shrinks to my level and I can smell the syrup of his breakfast or the coffee of his lunch. He studies my temple, my jawline, my forehead before pressing the blade

to my skin. Other barbers with heads in their hands glance to see the precision and gently slow nod in approval. Sometimes other clients do the same. Sometimes there's a whole congregation of affirmation in those nods.

At the barbershop are good spells and good patience. Good grief and good places to let our guards down. Sometimes all I can make out are good sneakers, nodding heads and hands. Good hands. Their hands make good work of us. Like small Gods we surrender to every two weeks. They make us anew.