

# The Weight of Water

*by Roxane Gay*

Water and its damages followed Bianca. Every time she looked up. Everywhere she looked up. Up up up up. Water stains, in darkening whorls, curling across the drywall or fiberglass panels, filling them with rot and mold. Fat droplets of water fell on her forearm, her neck, her forehead, her lower lip. In the gym, one of the fiberglass panels had finally broken. The dissolved mush lay in a neat pile on the floor. There was a ladder beneath the empty space, an open toolbox. No repairman was in sight. She got on the treadmill, started running. Bianca's muscles stretched away from her bones and she fell into a comfortable gait. A droplet of water on the back of her neck, then another. She looked up, held her stride. A new stain slowly spread across the panel. She continued running.

Later, at work, Bianca sat at her desk and ate a sensible lunch—a turkey sandwich with mustard, lettuce and tomato. Above her, the ceiling panels had long rotted into something dark and unrecognizable. Her small office was filled with a dank smell that clung to her clothes for hours after she left work each night. Fortunately, Bianca was very good at her job. She worked efficiently. She worked fast. She was lovely to look at, wore the wet look well. After she finished her sandwich, she wiped the crumbs from her hands and turned to face her computer monitor. Bianca typed and typed and typed, her fingers making quick work of her work. She ignored the picture of her ex-husband on the corner of her desk. She should have removed it months ago but she wasn't going to let his countenance get off that easily.

They went to the Saharan Desert for their honeymoon, to do something good, Bianca said when Dean, her now ex-husband asked why they would go to the end of the earth. From village to village, dancing children ran to greet them, held their fingers to the rain

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that suddenly appeared. Dark people with white bright teeth formed tight circles around Bianca. They painted her face, lifted her up on their shoulders. They said she was a god. When she left, there were high-pitched wails of sorrow. Then, the rain was gone and Dean and Bianca began their lives as a married couple.

On the drive home, Bianca opened the sunroof, looked into the setting sun. Long after she pulled into her assigned space in the complex parking lot, she sat in her car looking up at angry rain clouds forming, following. For dinner, she ate pasta with a little butter and cheese, had three glasses of red wine. Above her, the ceilings groaned, swollen with the weight of water. Some nights, she lay on her couch and stared up, studying the concatenations of water stains, the new forms her ceiling was taking, the way the panels undulated when her upstairs neighbors crossed from one room to another. When she grew tired, she crawled into her empty bed, lay on her side, traced the slight indentation where her ex-husband used to sleep. "This is my life," she said to the empty room. "I am grateful." Then she tried to master faith.

Dean couldn't handle the watery rot that followed Bianca. It was too much, the falling water, the decay everywhere. On their last night, as they made love, Dean on his back, holding Bianca's ass in his hands, enjoying the way her body curved into him, as she rocked against him and moaned softly, as he said the final I love you he would ever say, he suddenly opened his eyes and could only see past his beloved wife, past the flat of her stomach and the gentle rise of her breasts and the lustrous black hair framing her face, to the decomposing darkness above them. His cock immediately grew limp. He felt all the strength he had ever possessed seep from his pores. Bianca moaned louder, stopped moving, planted her hands against his chest. "What's wrong?" she asked. She kissed his chin, nipped at his lower lip with her teeth, tickled his neck. He pushed her away. Even though he had no strength left, he was not gentle. She fell off the bed onto the damp floor. The next morning, Dean was gone. He

took nothing with him but the mold spores growing in his lungs. If she were the sentimental type, prone to the maudlin, Bianca would admit that he also took her heart.

When Bianca was only three days old, her mother noticed a small water stain in the corner of the nursery, just above the crib. She thought nothing of it. She held her beautiful baby with a thick head of black hair and clear blue eyes, swaying side to side, singing silly songs. She kissed the soft spot of Bianca's head and inhaled the sweetness. The older Bianca got, the more the stain grew until it had consumed the entire ceiling in a mural of black mold. A contractor was called. Her parents explained that there was a leak, that there was something unknown somewhere. An exhaustive search for the source of the damage was conducted. Nothing was found. The ceiling was replaced.

Bianca continued to grow, and new stains formed, travelling across the nursery ceiling late at night in deep arcs. After the third time they replaced the ceiling, her parents gave up. It was their daughter or their sanity, their marriage. They took Bianca to the orphanage on the edge of town, left her on the concrete steps with a note tucked inside her sweater. Bianca cried for four days after they left; not a soul could console her. The only picture Bianca has from her childhood is one the nuns took on her second day at the orphanage. In the picture, she's three years old. Sister Mary Angelica is holding her. Her chubby arms stretch out at angles, her tiny fingers curled into tight fists. Her cheeks are bright with anger, slick with tears. Her eyes and mouth are red wide open.

Bianca agreed to go on a date with Dean, who worked in the law firm a few floors below her office, only after he began leaving her handwritten notes on her desk each morning. He wrote her lovely, whimsical things. He had perfect penmanship. He told her all the things he loved about her and he used that word—*love*—without any self-consciousness. When she finally gave in to his advances, she

suggested an outdoor café. As they ate and smiled at each other dark clouds circled above their table. She could feel raindrops on her shoulders. In the near distance, there was sunlight. "That's the damndest thing I've ever seen," Dean said.

By the end of the meal, they were teasing each other with their feet. He traced the fine knuckles of her hand with his fingers and smiled, never looked away. He asked if they might retire to her place for an after dinner drink. Bianca paled and Dean stammered an apology for being so forward. "No," Bianca said. "It's not that. My place is a mess." As he drove her home, they passed a park. She squeezed his shoulder. "Pull over here." Dean grinned and pulled into the empty parking lot. Bianca slipped out of her shoes and ran across the wide expanse of grass to the Merry-Go-Round.

There had been a playground at the orphanage. She often played there, alone. The other children were frightened of her, as were most of the nuns who tried to love her as one of God's children but failed. Priests from far away were brought in to examine her, to anoint her with holy water. They all said the same thing. Whatever plagued her was the work of the devil and his demons. Whatever possessed her was more powerful than their God. Sermons were delivered about her, about this child who was followed by water and decay. Bianca still managed to grow up a happy child. She would grab hold of a metal rail on the Merry-Go-Round and run as fast as she could. She would run until the ground moved with her and the wind would start whipping the clouds. As the raindrops started to fall, she'd jump onto the Merry-Go-Round and work her way to the middle. She would sit in the middle and throw her arms back, her face open to the wet sky.

"I haven't been on one of these in years," Bianca said, walking around the contraption slowly, touching each of the handrails. Carefully, she climbed into the center. Dean began turning her around and around. She closed her eyes, reached up into the cool

night breeze. When his arms grew sore, Dean stopped spinning and climbed onto the metal platform, still turning slowly. He knelt between Bianca's thighs and she began unbuttoning his shirt. When they were both naked, Bianca lay back, enjoying the sensation of the metal grooves against her skin. Dean kissed her forehead and her eyelids and her lips. He tasted like wine and salt and he smelled clean like soap. He marveled at the dampness of her skin, and licked droplets of water from the hollow of her neck. Then he was inside her, and he was her first and his mouth was hot against her ear, whispering all the lovely things he had written in his letters. He said I love you for the first time. She said it back. A warm rain began to fall on their naked bodies. Dean held Bianca's face between his hands, gently moved the long strands of her hair aside. As she looked into his eyes, and her body opened to him completely, she hoped against hope for cloudless skies and a world without water.

