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Sherman Alexie

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Dignity

Sherman Alexie

In the parking center, a black man runs
Toward me. He is angry or scared. I crouch,
Ready to kick and punch. I pray to God
(Which God? Any God.) for strength. But the black
Stranger veers away, grabs a paper bag
From a garbage can, and races upstairs.
Relieved and surprised, I laugh at my fear

But I am also ashamed of my fear.
(Aren't we all afraid of the color black?)
This black man, wrinkled as a paper bag,
Is homeless and detox-sick, so he runs
Because he needs to shit on the stairs
Before he shits his pants. Tell me, Rough God,
If a dignified man can proudly crouch

On the stairs and keep his dignity? Crouched
In a public place, crouched in pain and fear,
Has this man ever felt more old or black?
With dignity intact, I drive upstairs
As a thin white security guard runs
Into the stairwell. Does he curse his God
As he sees that man use a paper bag

For toilet paper? Can a paper bag
Contain any dignity? Maybe God

Tests our faith with paper bags. On the stairs,
The white guard attacks the homeless man, crouched,
Old, defenseless, rank with antelope-fear
And methadone-shit. That sickly man runs,
Clumsily pulling up his pants, stained black

With shit, city dirt, and sorrow. This black
Christian stumbles and falls. He loves his God.
"Lord, I'm sorry, Lord, I'm sorry I ran,"
He prays, but the guard, trapped by his own fears
And minimum-wage rage, only crouches

And handcuffs him. Thin as a paper bag,
The guard curses, "Don't you shit on my stairs.

This is my house, my house, my house." I stare
And wonder which man needs my help more: *God,*
Please love both of them. His paper bag
Heart is wrinkled and stained. His tin badge fear
Is bright and cheap. Black God, these men are black.
Though one is white. I help neither. I crouch
And look away. Undignified, I run.

Shame, that predator, crouches on the stairs.
Shame, that angry god, smells your fear. Pray. Run.
Shame wants to crush you like a paper bag.

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