

## Episode 2: "SAID A WORD FOR YOU."

[00:00:00] [slow piano music plays]

[00:00:30] [phone ringtone, music continues]

[00:00:46] **Brandon:** Hey Justen, this is Brandon, hope you're doing alright today. I was just reading this book that I've been going through for some time, it's called *Members of the Class Who Keep Daily Journals*. It follows the journals of two of the students in this class, these two women. [00:01:10] I wanted to read to you a journal entry from one of the women, Joan Frances Bennett. It's pretty interesting to me today, here it is: "New York, February 24th, 1968. When I was seven, I learned about the impertinent, invulnerable quality of life from a tree. It was a very tall tree that almost, it seemed to me then, met the sky. [00:01:40] I often stood propped against its trunk, or watched ants at its foot. It was part of the background I played and loved against and took for granted. One day it stormed, and as was my custom, I buried my head under a weight of pillows. But I still heard the sound. [00:02:00] The sound like a mammoth baseball being hit by the very tip of a mammoth bat. I had been through enough storms to know that a tree had been struck by lightning, and by following the direction of the sound I knew which tree had been struck. I was surprised—surprised that something had happened to something I knew. My circle had been impinged upon and I never thought of that possibility. [00:02:20] But I thought of it then. And I also thought that if even a tree was vulnerable than other things and people were vulnerable too. And for a while I had a sort of terror wondering what would happen next and why there was no protection from the non-part of my knowledge, who said nothing was strong enough, and that nothing lasted long enough." That's the journal entry. [00:02:50] I don't know, it just seemed kind of interesting to me, thinking about something like imprinting, and the grip that it can have on you. But then also another thing I've been thinking about lately is molting, like how snakes mold their skin and just thinking about growing, learning, gaining confidence and self-assurance and kind of molting some of the fears of our youth. So yeah, that's how I got to you, hope you have a good day. Love you.

[00:03:28] [Brandon stops speaking. The piano music continues and is joined by a saxophone and electronic loops.]

[00:04:11] [A heavy, distorted voice begins speaking under the music. Its words are inaudible.]

[00:04:50] [The music picks up tempo; the piano, saxophone, and loops are joined by a harmonium, a harp, and additional beats.]

[00:07:03] [phone ringtone, music stops. A deep voice begins speaking.]

[00:07:15] **Speaker 1:** Your life can be complicated sometimes. We all have our ups and downs, just as well as our good and bad. There are seven rules in life that you must always remember. Rule number one: smile, it always works in the end. Number two: be kind. You have the power to make people feel good. Number three: don't give up, if it doesn't work the first time, find another way. [00:07:40] Number four: don't compare. Everyone's on a different journey. Number five: avoid negativity—negative thoughts, situations, and people. Number six: make peace with your past. Focus on being present and creating a better future. [00:08:10] And last but not least, rule number seven: take care of your body and mind. So with all that being said, I'll end this with a prayer. Dear God, thank you for the nature of your love for me. There are many forces that tried to pull me away from you, but I decided not to budge. Thank you for showing me time and time again that your love is never going anywhere. It is with me forever. Thank you father, in Jesus's name I pray. Amen.

[00:08:50] ["Come Back To" by Jordan begins.]

[00:10:50] [The music stops. A soft, raspy voice begins speaking.]

[00:10:53] **Speaker 2:** I feel unwell more often than not as of late. I don't know if it is the disposition of our current climate or if it's father time. I suppose the way of my future weighs heavier than that of my past. Unknown possibilities, and paths yet to be led, shrouded in the fog of uncertainty. Trust in one's self is harder to find when you're unsure of who you will become. [00:11:20] What angers me, you ask? I suppose it's the truths I've always known, that which will not change, grow old, nor rot but instead that which will become richer and more nuanced, sweeter. It is that which I already love and trust. The twelve-year-old me understood this as much as the sixty-year-old me will.

[00:11:50] [The voice stops speaking. The sound of falling rain begins.]

[00:12:20] [An electronic soundscape with low and high-pitched vocals begins over the sound of rain.]

[00:13:56] [phone ringtone, music stops]

[00:14:11] [A clear, modulated voice begins speaking.]

**[00:14:11] Speaker 3:** In conversations about getting the vaccine the last few months, what I've been repeating ad nauseum to my friends—my very patient, graceful friends—is that the history of medicine in this country is “oops.” By that I mean this country's medical establishment has betrayed trust, has ruined countless precious lives and bodies, and so often offered little more than a feeble, much belated apology. My point is this: it is roundly absurd, maddening, grotesque to expect a Black body to readily trust American medicine. **[00:14:5]** From September 26th to December 5th, 2020, Vielmetter, Los Angeles showed a collection of Rodney McMillian's work entitled *Body Politic*. Mostly the work was of two kinds. Some were large chicken-wire, cardboard, and canvas sculptures, each painted heavily in all black like some sort of massive, morbid papier-mâché. And the others were large canvases covered in thick, oozing paint and bold contrasting colors, obscuring lettering McMillian had excerpted from various speeches and texts which speak generally to the nexus of Black health and American history. **[00:15:30]** It'd be cute to try something about McMillian prophetically foreseeing the medical crisis the world would find itself in mere months before the opening of his show, but that cuteness would prove inane. It was no coincidence, or rather then was no more relevant a time to hold the show than any other time. American medical racism is always relevant because it's always happening. There has never been a time in this nation's history when Blackness was not bound with disease. **[00:16:10]** Fact: to be a healthy Black body in America is to be an exception. The American psyche is sick. I'm grateful for how matter-of-fact McMillian's show was. I felt the need to make plain in conversations about the vaccine that nothing is knowable, none of us *know* that it's safe. Presumably there are really well-informed, well-intentioned doctors all over the world working very hard to make sure it's safe. But those doctors are small, and the system of medicine in this country, the systems of medical education and administration of medicines are big, massive. **[00:16:50]** They are faceless and they are not benevolent. There is a lack of systemic care in this country. We have no culture of care.

**[00:17:11]** [Speaker 3 pauses, a discordant reed instrument plays in the background.]

**[00:17:19] Speaker 3 continues:** This year has found me waiting in a wretched cynicism. I have no faith in America's moral center. And individuals, sure—I am, this chapter aside, an optimist—but Black life has never mattered to the blood-soaked entity that calls itself America, to the tentacle called American medicine, to that whip hand that is American justice. **[00:17:40]** And so when folks find reassurance and say, Barack Obama's being vaccinated, all I can think is “They'll let that motherfucker die too,” which is always followed in my mind by the obligatory but also absolute conspiracy-theory thing to say, which is “And how would we know if what he's getting in his shot is the same thing we'd get our shots?” I'm not a QAnon conspiracy

theorist and I'm not an anti-vaxxer. I do believe in going to the doctor. **[00:18:20]** I've gotten annual check-ups my whole life at the same pediatrician my entire childhood. And now as an adult, I visit the same primary-care physician my mother has seen since moving to America from Ethiopia over thirty years ago. I don't believe in some cabal attempting to implant a chip in my arm with the purpose of controlling my mind. It's not a question of malice for me, I don't believe there is malice involved in the formulation and administration of the COVID vaccine. True, America has been guilty of systemic malice for far longer than it has not been. But at present, what is far more prevalent is systemic negligence. **[00:19:00]** A profound lack of carefulness and mindfulness. More than there are malicious individuals all over the country, there are ignorant and inconsiderate ones focused on their own personal gain. And so that's what I think is more likely here. Lots of foul play, lots of pain, and even death because of greed and negligence at every level of this country's mechanization.

**[00:19:33]** [Speaker 3 pauses, a discordant reed instrument plays in the background.]

**[00:19:52] Speaker 3 continues:** As if the summer had not been hard enough, McMillian's show was heartbreaking. Seeing the Black man that I love stand immobile for minutes, taking in McMillian's *Untitled Entrails* sculpture was heartbreaking. Moving from one canvas to the next and the next, knowing that this was a fraction of a sliver of a morsel of what violences McMillian could have cited was dizzying, blood curdling. **[00:20:20]** But it was frank in a way I continue to be grateful for. I just want everyone to say, to accept, that there is no reason to have faith in American medicine and there is no reason to have faith in American justice. I'm starting a PhD program at UCLA in the fall, and the university fully expects to be able to hold in-person classes for the upcoming '21–22 academic year. **[00:21:00]** And they've just announced that getting the COVID vaccine will be a requirement of attendance. I knew they would. I knew this was coming. And yet I was surprised by how upset the announcement made me. I was surprised to realize how afraid I really am. I feel stuck between two deaths, or I feel stuck in some liminal space between bound and unfree. **[00:21:30]** And surprisingly, though the connection was not at all clear to me until very recently, I began reading Veda and herbology in holistic medicine. I've also started seeing a therapist. In order to participate in this next course of professional study that I've so long dreamed of realizing, I'll have to submit to being vaccinated. It seems to me that the most I can do in light of this inevitability is ready my mind for what this body will have to accept. **[00:22:20]** I can't stop asking myself. Is Rodney McMillian getting the vaccine? There was another piece in McMillian's show which proved distinct from the others, a massive vinyl and thread collage—maybe to describe it as a quilt would be better. It was made of white shapes, layered and stitched

to depict the White House shrouded by a shiny, looming black sky. **[00:22:40]** And then there's this Kathleen Collins quote: "We can't fight time, we can't get over anything faster than we're supposed to. Whatever we have to live through, we have to live through until its time is up. I'm saying all this to say that I think my present sense of clarity is not my victory, but times'." Kathleen Collins, *Notes from a Black Woman's Diary*.

**[00:23:20]** [Speaker 3's voice recedes, a saxophone begins playing in the background.]

**[00:23:40]** [Several different voices begin speaking, layered over one another. They are a mixture of new voices and snippets from previous dialogue. Slow guitar music plays in the background.]

**[00:24:28]** [One gruff voice becomes clearer than the others]

**[00:24:28]** **Speaker 4:** I need you to call me back. [the sound of a phone receiver clicking, hanging up]

**[00:24:30]** [END OF AUDIO]