THE WILL TO CHANGE

Also by bell hooks

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THE WILL TO CHANGE

MEN, MASCULINITY, AND LOVE

bell hooks

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"Alchemically transforming lead into true gold, men are given the opportunity to burn, to be touched by an inner fire, to live a life of substance, to be changed utterly."

This book is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather, Gus Oldham—burning, a heart on fire, whose love, stronger than death, illuminates.

In our rapidly changing society we can count on only two things that will never change. What will never change is the will to change and the fear of change. It is the will to change that motivates us to seek help. It is the fear of change that motivates us to resist the very help we seek.

—Harriet Lerner, *The Dance of Intimacy*

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Introduction

I guess we'll start on an Amtrak in 2012 between Buffalo and Hudson, New York, where I'm headed, along with my friend Aimee Nezhukumatathil, down to a brief writing residency that Millay Arts was so generous to offer us and about four or five other early-career writers. My second book had come out the year before, and I was at the very beginning of the poems that would become *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude*, which at the time I was calling, nodding to Neruda as I did so, *Ode to the Mundane World*. At the time, Aimee and I were also polishing up an epistolary chapbook about our gardens called *Lace and Pyrite: Letters from Two Gardens*.

After Aimee and I ate our peanut butter and jellies, which her husband, Dustin, had so kindly whipped up for us before dropping us at the station early-ish that morning, I told Aimee I needed to call bell hooks. She was like, *Call who?* I was like, *bell hooks*. She was like, *Wait, bell hooks. Yes,* I said, *bell hooks*. No, I was not pals with bell hooks, nor sadly would I ever get to be. I had been enlisted by an independent scholar who was organizing a conference on Sylvia Plath, and she thought hooks, with her expertise in literature, popular culture, feminism, etc., would offer a brilliant take. My sole duty to do with this conference was to

invite bell hooks, by phone, to give an address. Probably the keynote, as it's called, for some reason.

A duty that I had put off until what the organizer told me was the last minute. Anyway, the last seconds of the last minute were whirring by out the window of this train along with the lush vineyards before the hills rolling into the Catskills, so I slid into the empty seats across the aisle from where Aimee and I were camped out, opened the notebook on which I had written the details of the ask, found hooks's phone number, and called. And when, as I did not expect her to do (perhaps that's generational; perhaps it betrays my own telephonic [dis]proclivities), she answered her phone, asking, *Hello*, meaning, *To whom am I speaking*, a voice came out of my mouth that was almost an octave higher than my voice, and a bit reedy, and quavering something like a goldfinch on a sunflower or a butterfly wobbling on a zinnia.

No kidding I turned into a goldfinch I turned into a butterfly hearing hooks's voice, no wonder I turned into a child, for I was speaking to someone whose work had been absolutely essential not only to my thinking but to how I considered the possibilities of being a writer. The possibilities of being a person. Almost exactly ten years before this phone call a friend had taken from her bookshelf hooks's book *Black Looks: Race and Representation* when I was trying, *struggling*, to write my own dissertation, looking for a voice or a stance or a manner of reading and writing I had not yet found elsewhere. And I came to her book *Teaching to Transgress* not too long after that, just beginning to think hard about teaching, reading her along with Paolo Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and June Jordan's *Poetry for the People*. And the book that was in my backpack at that very

moment (along with Virgil's *Georgics* and Juliana Spahr's *Well Then There Now* and a few others) was *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, which was helping me think about land and race and home and nation, questions I have been thinking about, writing about, to this very day.[1]

In fact, hooks modeled for so many of us a way of being a writer and a thinker. She showed us how to write about a breadth of subjects, in a breadth of modes, for a breadth of audiences. And, I think, most importantly, she showed us how these pursuits or endeavors or modes or critiques or questions—all of our questions—might come back to love. She seems always to wonder, and made of her writing life the beautiful, essential question: How do we better love one another?

Which is to say, that goldfinch that butterfly that tithonia wavering in the wind who came out of my mouth to speak on my behalf to bell hooks, who is *among the people who have given me my life*, was the condition of being grateful. Of becoming suddenly alert to the fact, *alit* with it, *alighting* on it, that you are more than yourself. And again, gratitude not only for the work but for what's behind the work, the engine of it, which is, let me say it again: love.

And to think that I had not yet even read, nor would I for a little over a decade, her book, *The Will to Change: Men,*

1 As I've been going through the several bell hooks books in my library, only one of which I seem to have been the sole owner of, I realize that I adore deciphering what people have scribbled in the margins of their, our, books. What we underline or bracket or star or exclamation point. What we circle and arrow toward a question mark or two. How we agree, or dispute, or wonder. What we asked. How we were moved. How we were becoming. How, in the margins, is one of the archives of our changing.

Masculinity, and Love, published the same year my father died, twenty years ago as I write this, and had I read it, well, the quavering would've been more intense, as probably would've been the flowers, and the birds, for so many of the insights of this book feel like they speak not only to some of my own experiences as a man but maybe more poignantly and profoundly this book speaks to me of my father's and my relationship. To the struggles of it I mean: the difficulties, and the sorrows. Sorrows *The Will to Change* sheds light on when it explores with patience and generosity and, well, *love*, patriarchy's costs to men, some of which by now (I hope) we might be a bit more aware of than twenty years ago when this book was first published, let alone when I was growing up, or when my dear father was.

In the preface to *The Will to Change*, hooks considers a passage by the writer Barbara Deming in which Deming's father has a heart attack in the garden, and as the EMTs are trying to keep him alive, and failing, she holds her father, realizing "this was the first time in my life that I had felt able to really touch my father's body. I was holding hard to it—with my love—and with my grief. And my grief was partly that my father, whom I loved, was dying. But it was also that I knew already that his death would allow me to feel freer. I was mourning that this had to be so. It's a grief that is hard for me to speak of. That the only time I would feel free to touch him without feeling threatened by his power over me was when he lay dead—it's unbearable to me. And I think there can hardly be a woman who hasn't felt a comparable grief." hooks then acknowledges that she, too, had had the same feelings about some of the men in her life, especially her father, who had often been a prototypical dominating man. "Women and female and male children,

dominated by men, have wanted them dead because they believe that these men are not willing to change." Then, crucially, this last sentence: "They believe that men are hopeless."

When I first read this—or, confession: I first *listened* to the book—walking east on West 6th street in Bloomington, Indiana, passing the church where the cherry trees used to stand—one sweet, one tart, probably a Montmorency—I stopped and pushed the little fifteen-seconds-back button a couple times to see if I heard it right, which, listening again: yup, I did. Then I listened to it again. *Damn*, I thought, and maybe even said. *Damn, you're not supposed to say that.* (We could count on hooks for saying such things.) Shortly after that I called one of my dearest friends, a dude who, well, I figured would also say *damn*, and in that *damn* express understanding the sentiment from both sides: probably having at some points in his life wanted a dominant father gone, and also probably having at some point(s) in his life been the kind of man that someone else, a partner or lover, maybe even a father—oh, there's a third side: maybe even himself—might want gone. But, to be clear: *dead* is the word hooks used. *Damn*, we both said, and wondered some together.

It's inside of that last sentence that I felt so understood by hooks: "They (we) believe that men (we) are hopeless." Which is to say, though I didn't actually wish for my father to be dead—I mean, in my teens a few times I did; though *beat his ass* is how I usually expressed (not to my father) what I wanted to do to my father, once in an origamically folded note to a crush that my father found while he was doing the laundry one weekday home from work, which he left open on my bed atop my clean clothes, after which I

wished *I* was dead—I did think, or maybe *felt* is the better word, that our relationship was hopeless. I did sort of feel that it would not change. I couldn't imagine it. We were both too rigid, too stalwart, too convinced of ourselves. We were too arrogant, too right. Too sturdy, too strong. Too incurious, too stuck. Too textbook, these two unbudging dudes. Clinging to our sad inheritance of what the writer Don Belton calls "generations of masculine silence."

Which, hooks teaches us, is at least in part born of the blunting or hiding or squashing or diminishing or demeaning or killing of feelings, many of them anyway, probably even most of them, often required of men. Required, in some way, of all of us to endure patriarchy, to endure and participate in any "system of domination and coercion," of which there are many. "Again and again," hooks writes, "men would tell me about early childhood feelings of emotional exuberance, of unrepressed joy, of feeling connected to life and other people, then a rupture happened, a disconnect, and that feeling of being loved, of being embraced, was gone. Somehow the test of manhood, men told me, was the willingness to accept this loss, to not speak it even in private grief." She calls this "the primal moment of heartbreak and heartache: the moment that they were compelled to give up their right to feel, to love, in order to take their place as patriarchal men."

And so it is that, having been drafted into a particular kind of masculinity myself, a kind of hardness (which I now understand is brittleness) required, as hooks calls it, of "the will to dominate," it is only while writing this introduction, in the summer of 2024, twenty years after my father's death, just turned fifty myself, that I am finally realizing that what I often felt in his presence, though it

came out as anger or exasperation or embarrassment or judgment or *yeah, whatever man*, was sadness. I was so goddamned sad around my dad that we had been disconnected from each other. Which, drafted as I'd been, I never in a million years would've copped to. Nor, I suspect, would've he. This was, at the time, beyond either of our reach.

Until, that is, like Deming's, my father died. Or started dying, I should say. Which, I know, I know, we're all always doing, but I guess I mean in a more official and emphatic way. After my father was diagnosed with stage four liver cancer, I moved in with my folks, which allowed my mother to keep working, almost constantly (she had the good insurance), and allowed me to take care of my father, who, for the first time I knew of, needed taking care of. Help getting out of the chair after the surgery that didn't work. Rides to appointments and radiation treatments, which didn't work. Cooking for him if he could eat. Cooking sometimes to encourage him to try. Watching him sleep, which he more and more did. As he became so thin his bones pushed through and his eyes grew large. And his body swelled with liquid. And it was hard for him to breathe. And he hurt. And the blood transfusions stopped working. And the light on the scans went, eventually, completely away, and shone instead from what most remained of him, which was how soft he was, and still. And by the time his kidneys stopped working and the writing was on the wall that he was about to die, I held my father, rocking him with my hand on his heart, telling him again and again that I loved him, which I trust he heard, and felt, I think you could safely say that our relationship had changed. Which is to say, *we* had changed.

And as much as I'm grateful for those five months, for

the rehabilitation and repair they offered us, the opportunity they were to change, I can't help but wonder what would it have meant, and what would it have taken for us, before the liver cancer, before the imminent death, despite their clumsiness and wrongheadedness and didn't know better, despite their accidents and meanness and immaturity, to come to honor the need, in themselves as in the other, as hooks writes, "to love and be loved"? What would it have taken not only to be able to feel such need but also to say it to one another, and to have practiced it? And by practicing, I mean learning how to do it, together: stumblingly and awkwardly and stupidly sometimes too probably. But practicing all the same. What would we have had to forgive? What would we have had to grieve? And what would it have taken, and what would it have given, to move softly through the world like that? And what might that softly moving make, and make possible?

That softly moving, it seems to me anyway, is precisely the question, and the hope, of *The Will to Change*. Indeed, it is the *hopefulness* of *The Will to Change*. This book helps us to imagine and enact our changing toward one another. Which is to say, it helps us to love one another. And there's something magical to me, and moving, knowing that this book was blooming into the world at the same time as my father was blooming from it, and that though I did not have this book as a guide or something I could've shared with my father when he was alive, because my relationship with my father continues to evolve, I *am* sharing it with him. And it continues to help me love my father. I am more able to grow toward him, *change* toward him I mean to say, thanks in no small part to this book. And if I am changing in my relationship with my father—

softening, opening, wondering—I think, I hope, I am changing in all of my relationships. Which includes my relationship to myself as a writer, a writer who might have found that his central questions, his subjects, are gratitude, and joy, and, after our teacher bell hooks: *love*.

After hooks kindly declined our offer to keynote, she asked me about myself, what I was working on, etc. By now I had reconstituted somewhat, the birds and butterflies had flown back into my mouth, the little boy into my heart, and I sounded a bit more like myself, whoever that is. I told her about the chapbook of epistolary poems I was on my way to finish up, and the other books I was at various stages of working on. She listened so generously, asking questions of each of the projects. I can't remember if we talked specifically about *Belonging*, but I know I tried to tell her how grateful I was for her work, how important it was to me, how essential. I imagine I stumbled around a little bit in doing so and was not especially articulate. You just want to say thank you right.

Probably this happened to her a lot. She let me have my moment before saying something like *thank you for telling me* or *I'm happy to hear that*. And as we were getting off the phone she gave another vote of confidence to the new projects, and after we both said our goodbyes but before we hung up she told me, if I was ever in the area, I ought to call her and drop by. I suspect she would've picked up.

PREFACE

About Men

When Phyllis Chesler's book *About Men* was first published more than ten years ago, I was excited. At last, I thought then, a feminist thinker will explain this mystery—men. Back then I had never shared with anyone the feelings I had about men. I had not been able to confess that not only did I not understand men, I feared them. Chesler, with her usual "take no prisoners" daring, I was certain, would not simply name this fear, explain it, she would do much more: she would make men real to me. Men would become people I could talk to, work with, love. Her book was disappointing. Filled with quotes from numerous sources, newspaper clippings of male violence, it offered bits and pieces of information; there was little or no explanation, no interpretation. From that time on I began to think that women were afraid to speak openly about men, afraid to explore deeply our connections to them—what we have witnessed as daughters, sisters, grandmothers, mothers, aunts, lovers, occasional sex objects—and afraid even to acknowledge our ignorance, how much we really do not know about men. All that we do not know intensifies our sense of fear and threat. And certainly to know men only in relation to male violence, to the violence

inflicted upon women and children, is a partial, inadequate knowing.

Nowadays I am amazed that women who advocate feminist politics have had so little to say about men and masculinity. Within the early writings of radical feminism, anger, rage, and even hatred of men was voiced, yet there was no meaningful attempt to offer ways to resolve these feelings, to imagine a culture of reconciliation where women and men might meet and find common ground. Militant feminism gave women permission to unleash their rage and hatred at men but it did not allow us to talk about what it meant to love men in patriarchal culture, to know how we could express that love without fear of exploitation and oppression.

Before her death Barbara Deming was among those rare outspoken feminist thinkers who wanted to create a space for women to talk openly about our feelings about men. Articulating her concern that the wellspring of female fury at men was making it impossible for women to express any other feelings than their sense that "men are hopeless," she stated: "It scares me that more and more women are coming to feel this way, to feel that men as an entire gender are hopeless." Deming did not feel that men were incapable of change, of moving away from male domination, but she did feel that it was necessary for women to speak the truth about how we think about men: "I believe that the only way we can get where we have to go is by never refusing to face the truth of our feelings as they rise up in us—even when we wish it were not the truth. So we have to admit to the truth that we sometimes wish our own fathers, sons, brothers, lovers were not there. But, this truth exists alongside