

# For the Young Black Man with Heavy Footsteps

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Tuesdays at eleven o'clock at night  
    On my way home from the library  
        I don't assume the color of a shadow  
But I avoid dark alleys –  
Keys in hand,  
    Pepper spray in my pants pocket.  
*I hear footsteps more often than not,*  
    *They disappear at the stoplight on Blackford*  
    *Or the crosswalk on Michigan.*  
*Today they fall heavy past both.*  
On stormy or starless or still nights:  
Walk with Purpose Always  
    Prey is never confident in its steps  
    Chin up, shoulders back –  
Maybe pretend to talk to someone on the phone  
(Better yet, actually talk to someone on the phone).  
Glance back, just slightly  
    Pretend to check something in your purse,  
“Keep your head on a swivel  
    Change directions  
        Take the well-lit sidewalk paths.”  
*Damn, I parked far today.*

A couple in the distance walks arm-in-arm  
The woman laughs, he kisses her forehead  
The cold air separating us seems small to the sky above us  
I wonder if we look like a couple –  
    This stranger walking far too closely behind me –  
        And me, itching toward the pepper spray,

My eyes twitching toward the stranger's footsteps.  
I see his face. It's dark and he's wearing a hoodie.  
The color of the footsteps doesn't change anything  
but  
I realize in that moment that he might think  
Me a racist –  
Scared only by the color of his skin –  
And I wonder if he will write a poem  
About how he felt in that moment  
And the judgmental young girl with creamy skin  
Who locked the doors of her car  
Then locked eyes with the young boy  
on his way home from the library.