

## Week 5 Discussion

*edited minimally, for style*

### Folk Tradition and Communal Knowledge

**Shelley:** What are three places in the second half of the collection where you see direct or indirect reference to myth, legend, folk tale, or other communal folk knowledge? Where do you see Kenan alluding to other texts or stories?

**Kyrsten:** I'm not sure if I would say this is a direct answer to your question, but I would like to start with "Run, Mourner, Run." Dean seems to me a Cinderella figure, working hard and constantly being undervalued. His mother has lost her husband. She's not quite evil stepmother level, but she is clearly not her old self. Dean wants to rise up from this dirt-poor existence he lives in, and Terrell comes to him like a fairy godfather. However, much like most of Kenan's work, this tale does not move or shift in the ways we expect. Dean follows Terrell's instructions to seduce Ray, but Terrell takes back his word (not surprising) and leaves Dean worse off than before. And the prince figure, Ray, loses as well, since he has to sell land that he never wanted to get rid of to begin with. I'm not sure if it was an intentional allusion to Cinderella, but this story reads to me as if it's Tims Creek version of the tale, a version steeped in the realities of life, and it is one that knows that things are too good to be true, especially for people in Dean's situation (poor, uneducated, queer). Kenan shows us that not all damsels are women, and not all damsels get the help they need. In fact, I think he shows us that in truth, damsels don't typically get rescued.

**Cheyron:** I would further argue that Terrell functions as the evil stepmother and his sons the evil stepsisters. Like Kyrsten says, as soon as Dean does what he is asked Terrell double crosses him. Keeping Cinderella in mind, that fight scene reminded me of the dress tearing (like in the Disney version). Dean goes in to talk to Terrell, to ask for a chance at the future that should be his, and Terrell belittles and embarrasses him. His sons beat him and throw money at him, and he is eventually fired.

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**May:** There was only one connection I made to a fairytale while reading and it was at the end of “Tell me, Tell me” when Ida was running and she lost her slipper. In Cinderella, she was running before her real identity could be exposed, just like Ida. At that point she was running for her own life so who she really would also not be exposed.

### **“What Are Days?”**

**Kyrsten:** I felt huge Snow White vibes from Lena’s story in “What are Days?” There are so many moments in that story where she is looking in the mirror and speaking to herself about her body, her image, and self-perception. And while she does not blame some other young thing for her aging, there is a realization for her that she is not what she used to be. But something that I love about Kenan is that he does not stick to any expected trope. Lena learns acceptance of self by the end of the story as she reclines back to enjoy a cigarette in Cannonball’s (now her) chair. And to shift a bit here I would like to ask a question: What do you all think about this shift with Lena’s story away from Tims Creek, since she moved away quite a long time ago? Her past is a part of Tims Creek, and so is her husband, so why do you think we get her tale physically taking place in New Jersey?

**Cheyron:** Despite how far away Lena moved and her deep desire to not be in Tims Creek, she could not escape the way it structured her world view. It wasn’t until she met “Shang” (not his real name) that she was able to shed some of the cultural presets she learned in Tims Creek, which were oppressing her. I feel like Shang is definitely a trickster character. He doesn’t harm Lena; he becomes the origin of her rebirth into a more autonomous woman who is actively putting herself first. Since we are discussing “What are Days,” why does Shang constantly sush/interrupt Lena?

**Kyrsten:** Oh man, I will say I was initially quite annoyed with “Shang” for his shushing of Lena during their time together, but now I look at those moments a little differently. As Chey mentions, Lena seems to finally break free of Tims Creek through her dalliance with Shang. Her sexual encounter with Shang seems to become her phoenix moment, the moment where she lights on fire to become a newer version of herself, and I think it is important that it is with

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someone who is not from her hometown. We know Cannonball was from back home, so even leaving the small town, they were always going to have the remnants of their upbringing around them. But Shang has no association with Tims Creek, and that in and of itself I think becomes the match. Lena thinks of “the musk and the juices and the now-gone heat” (206), so we are seeing even in her reflections that the sex that weekend is associated with some sort of heat, even if it is just body heat. Shang is the figure of emancipation, as he frees her from the “cage” of her life and allows her to move forward reborn into perhaps what she was always meant to be, the phoenix that has risen from the ashes of her past.

**Oakley:** In general, Brian Norman writes that in *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*, Kenan writes about all things that “are forbidden,” like death, necromancy, and incest. Norman argues that Kenan writes about tradition while also reinventing new forms of narrative. This even reminds me of the story of Adam and Eve; what was forbidden is what was so desired. Since they ate the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve and all of humankind now experience the difference between good and evil, sadness and happiness, life and death; we’ve learned to move forward as human beings. I think this is an idea Kenan was playing with: the concept of knowing the difference between acceptance, rejection, and indifference. He is playing with the fact that even though there is a separation between life and death; we know each and their separation is not as great as we would expect. He plays with the emotions of the audience by playing with the connection these characters have with each other, living and dead. I also can’t help but think about “What are the Days?” Not only does Lena have a relationship with a young man, but he also happens to not really exist. So another forbidden relationship can be between an older woman and her “demon lover

**Cade:** I’m curious about Oakley’s reading of this story: do others think of Shang as being nonexistent? I took it to mean that he lied about his identity, not that he was a fabrication. I had a difficult time overall in understanding the message of this story, so I’m not necessarily disagreeing with the read so much as being interested by this perspective.

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**Tanner:** I saw Shang as this “demon lover;” but I do not believe that he is evil. He helped Lena learn this sort of self-love that she was missing before. However, he was manipulative and took advantage of Lena’s vulnerability.

**May:** Cade, initially I thought he had lied about his identity too, because I was looking for more. I wanted Shang to be real so that the relationship could continue. I believe Shang was someone sent to help her change her perspective about who she was. Shang was everything her husband was not or could not be. He made her feel alive again. Shang bought her back to life. It was more about “what” Shang did for her and not “who” Shang was.