

Reverie

Midwest African American Literature



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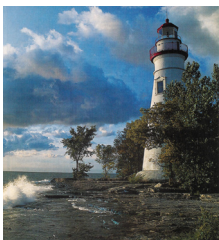
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Angela Jackson
~Featured Poet~

The Fabric of Our Lives

The streets had a cushion then
like velvet.
And street lights shone like satin.

The wind gave us lashes
our parents wore
on their backs.

Mothers, fathers made velvet; saw by satin
sounds of dreamers. Medium brown
in touch with spirits, rejected
just enough to be tough
Enough to be proud.

Every one remembered cotton, the bolls of it,
their backs still holding the bow,
arms, hands still holding the pick,
the toil of it.
Our cushioned streets
so many beats from cotton.

Wearing the wind's warp and woof.
The trees so bright; each leaf
a sequin.

The Island of Dr. Moreau

In a swaying canoe,
guided from a place
of dark miracles, in that moment,
We sit erect, two legs stretching before us
each. Risen from four
paws, hooves. Flesh, skin, heavy fur
removed.

We marvel at the wonders and mysteries
of our humanness.

We look at the new, wise lines
in each other's palms. Divine.
Hearts throbbing with the lilt-
ing bliss of slow, tongue-tipped music.
Mouths languaging what we know
we know.

Farther out,
losing sight of the bright, burning place
from which we cast off,
we gaze into the deep, salt
waters and do not see
ourselves, each other. Weeping.
Then hooves, or paws,
quivering fur again.

Niger: No Exit

A child, a brown child
brown skin with ragged pink open sores
lying still, so still.
Not even twitching to the tiny touch of flies.
Another with parasites in her mouth. O, Africa!
Could not eat
if there were something.
Still, so still.
Others eat starved rodents,
Rotting carcasses
of cattle.
Flies everywhere.
Flies lightning, rising, lighting
on the drought-dusty faces of children.
What would weeping do?
Still. I do.

Years before a little brown girl
put her head on her desk
and cried out
she wanted nothing to do
with Africa.
“They got flies all around they heads!”
she said.
Years before, I was not much more
than a brown girl
in a pristine classroom.
We read Sartre’s No Exit or
was it The Flies?
Flies everywhere.
A metaphor for Hell.

I don't believe in this Hell.
Only Heaven God ostensibly forgot,
yet keeps circling around
lighting, rising, lighting
on the surface of the world,
The faces of children.

Ida Watches

“Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.”

Ida B. Wells Barnett

Who goes there? Shuddering in the night wind,
bones knocking tinnily like venetian blinds
in a window. I look out, a watch woman
over History, a race woman. I loved you
and hid you against thundering hooves
and white wicked wizardry. I called your names
out one by one to be counted like stars or teeth
knocked out or buried in the deep blue mouth of a land
that should have been a heaven.

After riots in Elaine I visited sons in the executioner's
cells. “Quit talking about dying.” I paraphrase myself—
“An Almighty God has the power to set you free.
Pray to live and believe you are
going to get out.” And God

opened the doors and sons walked
free as a Negro could be in a land
that was supposed to be Heaven but
was not.

Still I am the watch woman watching
what I would rather not see. The executioner's cells
in the eyes of our own. The blood sport spilling.
I must say the Time of our Sorrow and the Time
of our Tomorrow on the brink of Despair
or Jubilee if we pray for it and believe.

Arthurine

Lean closer. I will tell you
how a woman wished me dead.
You think it is not possible
for someone to wish another
dead?

You see! People cast their eyes down
rather than look directly at me.
I am the object
of so many rumors.
Some of them false.
Some of them secrets
best shared by me.

Listen. People were forbidden
to even say my name,
which would be a gift
if they were profane.
But my name calls men
to me
and she could not have that.

These are the things she wished—
That my heart would give up loving.
That I would lose the courage
To speak the truth.
That I would zip my mouth shut
And cease to issue forth my wise
cracks.
That my kidneys would stop
cleansing my blood.

And my lungs end inhaling and
Exhaling hope.

She wished me evaporated
piece by piece.
Year after year.
Until she could say I was thin
air anyway.
The problem is
I did not die.
I am not successfully
Dead.
She cannot rest in peace.
Poor thing,
She wished so hard
for an accident.
to befall me.
She wished I'd trip.
She wished I'd give up
the ghost.

True. She gained some ground.
My teeth fell out.
My hair turned gray.
My womb grew tumors
instead of babies.
My blood pressure rose.
My body gathered stones
of fat.

But I refused to die.

Still
I refuse to die.
I implanted new teeth.

I colored my hair.
I had my womb scraped.
I lowered my blood's pressure.
I lost the weight
And just to spite her
I took a loving soul mate.

A virile man.
A man bright
As a new beau dollar.
A man with a smile
Like a slice of moonlight.
And a heart twice as loving
As love.

I decided to live.
I decided to live
To a dazzling old age.
Happily ever after
Me.

John Murillo

Ode to the Crossfader

Got this mixboard itch
This bassline lifted
from my father's dusty wax
Forty crates stacked in the
back of the attic This static
in the headphones Hum
in the blood This deep-
bass buckshot thump
in the chest These knuckles'
nicks and nightsweat rites
Got reasons and seasons
pressed to both palms Two
coins from each realm This
memory memory cross-
faded and cued This blood
in the crates in the chest
in the dust Field hollers
to breakbeats My father's
dust My father's dust Got
reasons Got nightsweats
and hollers Pressed to both palms
Stacked crates of memory
memory Fade This wax
This frantic abacus of
scratch Got reasons
in the dust Got reasons
in the chest Got seasons
in the blood In the head-

phones Hum This deep-
bass buckshot blood
Pressed to both palms Got
reasons and reasons

Sean M. Dalpiaz

“a spRing POEm”

Enclosed are a set of directions for your
second-to-last spring.

One more to go & who knows
where the poems will take you.

Let them take you,
the way a captor cherishes a captive,
the way a child bottles fireflies.

Spring has arrived,
clear and inviting.

The days are numbered before the numbers
aptly reverse the wonderment (often) associated
with next season's impression

Press on, poets
for tomorrow we'll write more.

Susan Nixon

ALL YOU HAVE IS INJURED FEELINGS

(Excerpt from FLATBLACK)

426 South Hill Street*
Los Angeles, California 90013
May 31, 1971

Dear Susan,

All you have is injured feelings.

I do want to make you understand that you and I have been victims of the corruption in society, and we shouldn't weep for ourselves but for the society that breeds such corruption. I was reading recently about the Boy Scouts' work in slum areas, trying to make the boys "hard as nails." That is, not unfeeling, but unflinching in the face of adversity.

You don't know what the future holds for you, but I would like to give you backbone, so that whatever comes, you can bear up under it.

I am quite certain it is "safe" for me to call you by phone periodically, but under these circumstances, you can understand that visiting each other in person is too hazardous.

Because of the nature of this letter, I am sending it Certified Mail. I am most anxious to have your comments. Could I persuade you to write?

Love,
Mother

**Excerpts from a letter typed by Thora Nixon, my mother. It was sent to me, her daughter, May 5, 1971 when I was 28 and we had been estranged for over 13 years.*

This letter from my Mommy, Thora Nixon, proves to me that she was crazy—schizophrenic—in 1971 when she wrote it. I still blame her. Thora is the most enduring woman I know. She says she was afraid, but in my deep places I always thought she was a participant in the conspiracy. Subversive.

As long as I can remember, Mommy was a little odd. As early as 1948, when I was 4 or 5 years old, I knew she wasn't herself. There is an old photograph that lives only in my mind's eye, since I can't seem to put my hands on it. It is a black-and-white photograph, with 1948 stamped in black on the white scalloped edge and Kodak stamped on the back. Mommy and I are standing together near the Cockrell's nursery school and playground at the Rosenwald, the new apartment building for the Negro bourgeois in Chicago's Bronzeville. Leafy trees dapple shadows over us, breaking the force of the afternoon sun.

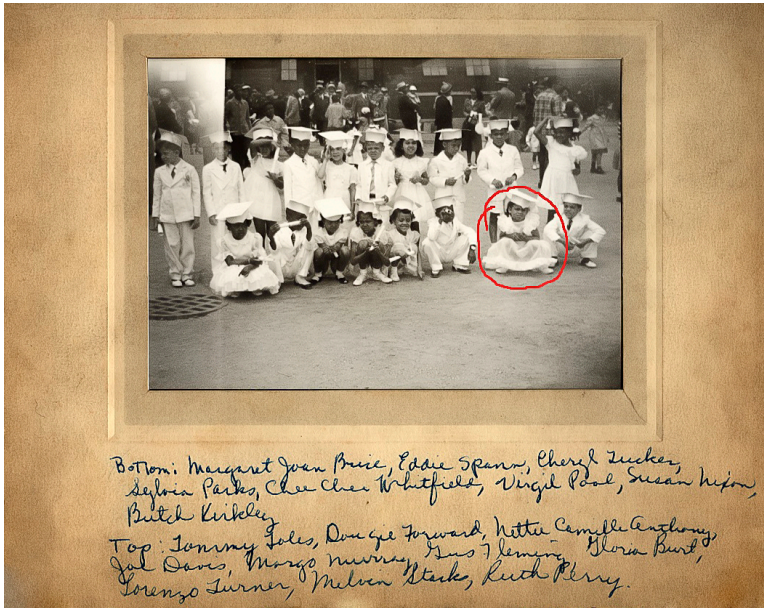
It wasn't a special occasion. Mommy was probably picking me up from school after work during one of the brief periods we lived together as family. My shorts are bunched up, my socks uneven in my oxfords, and my hand is clutching her skirt. My brown face and arms glow in the afternoon light. I was probably four or five years old Thora was less than 30. She is almost beautiful. Wisps of reddish-blond hair show around the edges of her crocheted skullcap. Maybe it's the slant of the sun but she is pale in the photo, her face, bare arms and legs disappear in their whiteness. Her red lip-sticked lips smile broadly, but she stares vacantly through

thick glasses. Her arm is draped easily over my shoulder. Did she know this would be the last of the happy photos of us together?

The Cockrell's nursery school was located in the basement of the Rosenwald, an apartment that spanned a full city block along Michigan Avenue between 46th and 47th streets. The flagpole with the benches around it was on the 47th Street end, and a playground was near the 46th Street end. Lawns and walkways with trees that changed with the seasons filled the interior of the walled fortress. The Cockrell's were part of the Negro post-war educational movement, emphasizing an excellent private education, because Chicago public schools were segregated. The nursery school served children from families belonging to the burgeoning Negro middle-class. I still don't quite know how I got in. In post war Chicago, an unmarried white woman with an obviously Negro child, no matter how attractive, just didn't measure up to the Cockrell's bourgeois standards.

But that is where I met Gloria Burte, who played the harp and got to be the Virgin Mary in the Christmas play. Wilhelmina Ballard's father was a lawyer with Congressman Dawson's firm. Beautiful Jeanette Cunningham's family had always been middle class, teachers and ministers. It turned out that Jeanette's mom, Mrs. Cunningham was my social worker, even before I actually knew I was in the foster care system.

I loved going to the Cockrell's School. The days were sunny and full of laughter. We lived a regular life: Mommy dropped me off in the morning, I played and learned all day, Mommy picked me up in the afternoon and we took the bus home. I was "graduated" from kindergarten in 1949.



The Cockrell's kindergarten class, June 1949.

Sometime that summer, Mommy told me she had to go away. She said it would be better for both of us. That she was protecting us from harm. Mommy told me to be a good girl, and that she would be back soon. But I never got to ask her where she was going and why.

“Be a good girl, now,” she instructed. “While Mommy’s gone I want you to promise to be a good girl, and I promise to come back soon so we can be a family again.”

What I didn’t know until later was that by then, Thora had contacted the FBI about the Communists, political corruption, narcotic deals, and insider information she learned about while working for the Chicago Defender. She had given the FBI addresses of buildings that she was sure was evidence of corruption related to building the Dan Ryan Expressway and urban renewal in Bronzeville. (The real origin of the information was research Thora had access to when she was a typist for Horace Cayton, Black University

of Chicago sociologist and the author of the seminal work, “Black Metropolis.”) Thora was sure “they” were pout to get her.

By 1949 she couldn’t manage anymore. She didn’t look sick and she didn’t seem to be any different that I had known her to be, but right after kindergarten graduation, Mommy checked herself into Manteno State Insane Asylum.

I was moved in with June Howe-Curran, her husband Jack—both of them high-yella Negroes—And Aunt June’s white mother, Mrs. Fisher, whom I called “Nana.” I don’t remember how I got to Aunt June’s, or who brought me there. Aunt June was the first foster parent I really remember. She was an aging beauty, short and plump. Nana, June’s mother, was kind to me, often embracing and comforting me. They lived in the Rosenwald Building on the 3rd floor. I gained some solace, though, because now I lived

In the Rosenwald Building. Maybe I could be part of this bourgeois Negro haven.

With a knowing look, Nana embodied high emotion. Her fat, firm hands cupped my cheeks. Nana forced me to look directly at her. Lightning seemed to bolt out of her deep blue eyes. “There’s no magic, Susie,” she told me firmly. “In all this world, there’s lots of problems and heartache. Some you just do with what you can and some you just let pass on by. Susie, I love you.” Her words and tone are seared inside me.

She planted me on the floor between her large hairy white legs with patches of scaly pink rash. She brushed my hair, her practiced fingers parting and braiding, as she hummed nothing in particular. When she was done, I stood up. “Lift your arms,” she murmured, and she pulled the dress over my head and down. “Turn around,” and her thick fingers buttoned and tied the sash and patted me as she inspected me.

Her toothless mouth and eyes smiled. She took my hand and led me to the kitchen.

It was the fall of 1950 and I was in the 2nd grade at Howalton Day School. I had been living with Aunt June, Uncle Jack and Nana for some eighteen months. All I knew was that Mommy was still sick and that Aunt June and Uncle Jack wanted me to be their little girl. Nana understood my dilemma. I wanted my own Mommy in the most fundamental way. It didn't matter that Aunt June and Uncle Jack treated me like a little princess. I hoped that being goo like Mommy told me to would bring her back. Plus, there was the issue of love. Aunt June, Uncle Jack and Nana often told me that they loved me, but how could I love them back without betraying Mommy.

This day, Mrs. Cunningham, (in her role as a social worker, though I thought she was just a friend) was coming to take us to visit Mommy. We had finished breakfast when we heard the doorbell ring.

"Who is it? OK. We'll be right down," June chirped into the intercom. She was ready to go. Her short hair in place, tinted purple to cover the gray, and her modest dress gracefully draped on her curves, June was a good-looking woman. "Come on, Susie, Mrs. Cunningham is waiting for us downstairs. You look so pretty, darlin'. Come on..."

"Where are we going? Are we really goin' to see Mommy?" I asked. Without warning the tears began again. I didn't mean to cry. Then my stomach curdled, and I threw up on my dress. Nana was there in an instant. She wiped my mouth with the edge of her housedress, and whisked me away.

"Dammit!" June mumbled under her breath. "I'm going downstairs. Bring her down when she's changed clothes." June put on her Persian lamb jacket and almost slammed the metal door.

After Nana cleaned me up, I came down to the car,

taking the back seat. Mrs. Cunningham was driving. Try as I might, I couldn't hear their animated conversation.

To fight carsickness, I closed my eyes and fell asleep.

"I can't see, goddammit," Thora hissed. "Where are my damned glasses, you assholes," she slurred. "I have to get dressed. Susie's coming to visit." Thora banged on the locked door of the room she shared with the other women. She looked down at the letter clutched in her hands, but she couldn't read it. Everything was fuzzy, blurred with no focus at all. "Give-me-my-glasses-now! Right Now!" she screamed and pounded on the door. Just as she was about to go into another hysterical fit, the lock turned and the door opened.

"Calm down." The aid adjusted the heavy key ring resting on her waist belt. "Calm down, bitch. There's nothin' you need to see right now. If you don't calm down, I'm gonna fetch the nurse ta give the shot."

The last thing Thora wanted was another shot. Well, that's not entirely true. The very last thing was another electric shock treatment. No. THE very last thing was to screw up this visit with Susie. She had tried to write to Susie, but paper and pencils were rare commodities inside Manteno. She thought about Susie when she wasn't thinking about all those others who were after her and all the secrets she was trying to keep from them. Thora was sure she had made the right decision. It was better to be safe in Manteno than to be gunned down on the street.

Thora was a voluntary patient. She trusted Dr. Adams, her psychiatrist, then. He had advised her to voluntarily "check herself in." That way, he told her she could "check herself out" without a hassle after six months. That was fine by Thora. Since she had begun her conversation with the FBI in 1948 she was terrified. Back then was when she became convinced that "they" generated the energy coming through the telephones. She was sure they were tapping her

phone and following her. She was afraid they were planning to kidnap Susie.

Mrs. Cunningham had been Susie's social worker from the beginning, and she had always kept her word. She assured Thora that Susie would be placed in a very good Negro home.

"It is today." Thora was sure the letter said November 10, 1950. Careful to the point of obsession, Thora had scratched off the days on her calendar. She was sure that her visit with Susie, Mrs. Cunningham and June Curran was today.

The room was crowded with other patients so it was important for the aid to lower her voice and soften her tone. "Good," thought Thora, "I need her to help me get ready. I must get ready. I must get ready. I must get ready. I must get ready."

A really good combination of temperature and water pressure can sometimes make taking a shower delicious. Thora was the only one in the dingy communal shower. The aid sat on a stool smoking a cigarette. Then, without warning, the water was ice cold. Shivering, Thora jumped away from the water and slid toward the aide. Thora, her pale skin already punctuated with dark purple splotches, could not stop shaking. The extreme temperature reminded her of the way she felt when she got her electric shock treatments and was made to 'recover' in an ice-filled tub. "Here, girl. Put your arm in here." The thick-bodied platinum blonde aide helped Thora into a newly laundered green patient housedress. It felt good next to her clean skin. She was just about ready. "Please, please may I have my glasses?" Thora asked in her best patient demeanor. "I have to be able to see Susie. I have to be able to see. Don't you understand, you stupid ass bitch? Give me my goddamned glasses."

By the time Thora got the "bitch" part, several other aids responded to that special pitch characteristic of the mentally ill. Some people describe it as the difference between a

healthy baby's cry and the cry of one that is sick. It is high pitched. It is always gasping for breath. It is not able to calm itself down with a hug or sweet song. Thora's voice had that special pitch, resonant with pain but filled with rage and fear. The aides held her. They knew how important this visit was to her. They had experienced Thora at her worst: screaming and ranting incessantly, unable to hold her bowels after the shock treatments, or drooling because of her medications. But in her quiet moments, when she had her glasses, she would always ask for paper and a pencil so that she could write a letter to her Susie.

The place where we met seemed dark to me. With no windows, even a million light bulbs couldn't take away the darkness of it. At first, I didn't recognize her. Mommy looked different to me. Her hair was straggly-straight. She didn't have any teeth, and she looked very old. She looked very white to me. Maybe it was the darkness. It was hard for me to focus. She held me so tight I thought I was going to be crushed. And she smelled funny. I didn't sit next to her. I sat next to Mrs. Cunningham.

Thora looked incredulous. "This is who you gave my child to? This is who you gave my Susie to? This bitch is a dope addict. Don't you know that? June Curran is a dope addict. I know 'cause I've seen her at Horace's. No! No! I will not let her adopt my child. Who does she think she is? Goddammit. This is my child and I will not give her up. I will not give her up to this dope-addict whore."

The aides came in to restrain Thora. She was halfway across the table, screaming and cursing and spitting. I barely understood her. Who is a dope addict? Why is Aunt June crying and Mrs. Cunningham holding my hand so tight?

A year later, in 1951, Thora and I were back together. She had a job, and I was still at Howalton Day School. We didn't live in the Rosenwald, but I came often to visit friends. Every now and then I saw Nana in the Rosenwald, and we would cry and hug each other. June said she never got over it. By 1954 she and her family had moved away to Los Angeles.

Richard Hamilton

In Four

wallowed in oiled lyrics
chain hand washed over
my balm and wicker
burning subduct plate ring
tree fire moon drone
lyre sings motherless child
cycles compress spokes turn
into low flicker notes
tickle throat cold chest
the more air consumes
in all likelihood strange
fruit possible insect bite
swell pedal crew crossing
faster comma the street
uphill we travel inroads
plausible voiced email period
no possible crush whistle
you D you hey
you motion of cop
car engine fan working
overtime cough attacks fire
bomb little children spare
tires burnt tonal shift
my heart coddles please
release metronome like space
hip hop beats imbibe
in the bass empty
feeling I get lost
in my country time

coo-coo hammer smell of
cork screw before you
know it feet pestle
sound into social tea
white lies singing thee

L. Lamar Wilson

Drive-By

Must be the dread-
locks, no, the red-hot Xterra, no
the deer-in-headlights glare after
a rear-end accident, the shock
of the hit-and-run, the latest irony of my existence
since the doctor's forceps snapped
my brachial plexus and left me a palsied leper.

Must be that, at 23, I am too
helpful to Ms. GoldStar Gumshoe.
Must be hiding something be-
hind my eagerness to hand over Florida
registration and grinning license pic,
riding through this side of Milwaukee's best
of the worst at 2 a.m. *I had a gig on*

32nd & Burleigh, I muster,
pointing to a beat-up trumpet case, but
Jazz? Cannot be that simple.

We just need to take you in to check things out.
I remain silent. *Bah daaaaaah! Bah daaaaaah!*
Bah doo dah! Dah dah daaaaah dee daaaaaah!
Bah daaaaaah!

crescendos inside me on the ride to the precinct, where

Turn! Flash. *Turn!*
Flash. *Turn!* Flash
welcomes me. Steeled into submission, I
sleep. Four hours pass. I awake, railing

*Why am I still here? Why am I still
here? Why ... Reluctantly, I
am released. But, seven years later,*

I am that baby, 1,000 miles away from any blood
I know, curled, fetal, in a metallic
womb, awaiting my rebirth.

I am that boy with an arrest record
not yet expunged, though the case is
thrown out in court, whose lawyer counsels
Just thank God you're alive in this town, son.

I am that man who shudders every drive-by, your
red, white, black and blue flashing. Yes,
your public service announcement, the roar
of your sirens, pierces me still, shoots
terror through my veins, today, on this mountain. Yes, I
die a little each time you whiz by,
searching for the next one of us to put away.

Patricia Barnett

Anjani's Song

My memories take me back to laughter in the tall grass. We are watching the boats drift into view across the horizon on the banks of my village in Bor, Sudan cir. 1847. My brother, Elijah, is running around my seated position chasing humming birds. We play in fields of lush thick that is a sea of rich purple and gold. We are waiting for my father's return on his Dongola boat.

Our village is located near the White Nile. My father transports passengers to neighboring villages and delivers for merchants. He has the most Dongola boats in my community and he is one of the wealthiest men of the area.

This day, my brother and I must go to the next town—Malakal—to have our lessons. Elijah is learning to play the copper drums and I am learning medications and remedies from my Grandmother Mulani. Looking back, even then I did not want to become the medicine woman for my village. I have always wanted to sing.

My father would say, “Ajani, you are responsible to your destiny. This is not something that you choose; it is instead that you are chosen.”

This is a difficult objective to comprehend at 13 years of age. The other young women in my village are preparing to be wed but I am not. The other children learn the art of theater but I do not. My role will be far too important in the future

to fill my mind with betrothal and musical frivolities; at least that is what my father tells me.

Still, there is a song in my heart that I want more than anything to intone. All around me are reminders of my desires. There is a falsetto bushlark tweeting in the brush and the crickets twitter their shallow tones through the larkspurs and delphiniums. From the time that these creatures enter the world, this is all they have to prepare for, bringing nature to life with their songs.

Luol, my father, brings his boat close to the riverbank. He motions us over with a swat of his large, cocoa toned hand. His singular motion catapults Elijah into action, charging towards the boat. My brother is the only boy, but the youngest. Had he been born as first child, I have no doubt that he would take my place as Village physician. And I would gladly take his place among the musicians.

Dreading the long afternoon of language teachings, root and herb identification, and prayer, I languorously stroll over to the hull of the vessel. My father does not attempt to disguise his anger at my behavior.

“Tsk, tsk....” He throws his hands out at his side and I am grateful that he turns his attention to the oar than in my direction.

My chosen seat is loaded with bundled provisions waiting for transport to their rightful owner, so I will have to take a seat next to my anxious sibling. He is very happy at the prospect of playing with the other drummers, as always, and is bombarding us with nervous conversation. Over the last two days, I have heard much about his playing for the visitors and the noble families in the other villages.

The pride is evident on my father's face. I am blissful for him as well, bar my own displeasure with my teachings. The sound of his voice begins to muddle as we cruise down the winding river. Imagination carries me to a grand coliseum that mirrors those of my father's tales. I am wrapped in a cloth so magnificent and as I open my mouth to sing, the crowd is aghast with the melodious song that embraces them.

"Ajani! We have arrived. Gather your things. Your Grandmother is waiting!" my father's agitation was still showing from earlier.

Not wanting to exacerbate the situation, I hurriedly gathered my collection of tributary herbs and hopped onto the sand. I could see my Grandmother in the distance standing like a soldier in front of her house. She did not live in a village any more. Hers was a solitary house that seemed so isolated to me as a child, but my age has taught me the value of peace and tranquility.

Grandmother Mulani was my maternal grandparent. She had never been married, never been circumcised. She was a physician; she needed to feel pleasure and pain. No other woman for miles had this liberty... but I would. It was believed that in order to be a physician, you had to remain unsullied by cultural and customary practices. The closer the physician to her birth state, the more astute. Much emphasis is placed on the preservation of natural spirituality and integrity through the years of training.

This old medicine women spoke in many dialects, various languages that showed no affinity to one village or another. She only had one daughter. My mother was the product of the union of two medicinal high priests. I never

met my maternal grandfather, nor were the two ever wed. This was not customary, as the union was only to continue the medical practices among the sovereigns.

My mother, Khalia, was not the intended in the line of succession to this role. The honor was bestowed to the most capable in each second generation. My mother had many miscarriages before I was born. When I was born in 1834, the sense of urgency was evident.

By the time that I was 4, I spoke in several tribal languages – Wulu, Wau, Tamburu. Our village lies between the White Nile and the Blue Nile. My other tribes and villages lie along the riverbanks, all with varied languages; all different cultures. It becomes an imperative for the local doctor to speak in all of the dialects and tongues that surround us.

When I was six, I was visited by a physician from the Northern Sudan. He wanted to ensure that I was a child of quality. My mother told me that when he saw me, he cried.

“Your daughter is my heart’s sonnet.” The old miracle worker breathed to my mother. When she tells us of this story, she is radiant and happy. I am her pride, as my family is mine.

This day, my heart was heavy and as I approached my grandmother, she could see it written across my ebony face.

“What is wrong, little one?” She asked me the question in Wulu, not her native tongue. No doubt my daily lesson had begun the moment I stepped into the clay structure. Her hut was sweet with the scents of warm shea and crillo cocoa nuts.

The clay walls carried the smells of ancient remedies and concoctions made of her hands. Children were born here, many illnesses were cured here. This was the place that would one day belong to me. I am chosen to cure the ailments of the masses, and restore to health the sick.

Even as I shook my head quickly, she knew that there was more to say in my heart.

“Andiqondi...” Her husky voice, a symptom of many years of smoking various types of tobacco in handmade pipes, carried over the rustle of preparation. She didn’t understand, spoken in Zulu to further quiz my language mastery.

“Grandmother, is it possible that I could select my own destiny? Make my own decision of whether to study with you, or study other things?” I was careful not to insinuate that I my true desires.

“Little one, we are all free to select our own desires. You have a responsibility to your soul to hear its call. Without following your chosen path, how can you care for others? How can one save others, if they, themselves, are dying?”

As my wise predecessor spoke these words, I surveyed my reflection in a mirror glass. My likeness showed me the features of both parents, the strong jaw of mother and high cheeks, full lips that set wide across my face. My locks glistened under the weight of the tui hair oil.

“If you follow your soul, how are you to cultivate your craft? We are born into the role of healer. It cannot be changed, this fate. Where is there the ability to choose? To follow your own wishes?” I asked these questions with the anticipation

of a child. I was a child, and though not expected to act as one, I could not help myself.

The tears felt as if they were burning forth from my tear ducts. I stared into her smoky eyes and shadowy skin tone. I wanted her to tell me that I would no longer have to take this occupation, that somewhere in another parish there is another little girl or boy that is predestined.

As her eyes warmed, I knew that she would tell me no such thing. I knew that her choice was her own grandchild.

“Ajani, you are the one. You are the person that will take my place. I fear that will be soon and my greatest prayer is that you are ready. Your lessons have taken a greater pace for this very reason. I do have something to show you, however, that may ease your troubled thoughts.”

It was then that this old lady took me to see her greatest pleasure. She opened a trunk in the corner of her hut. It was made of stamvrug, and the aroma of fruits rose into the air as she opened the lid. It was vast; it almost was as tall and long as my 13 year old fame.

I breathed deeply to inhale the fragrance. Taking one of the candles from its post, the matriarch leaned into the case. Her gentle nudge prompted me to take it from her.

It could not believe the story that my eyes told. There were tapestries, at least one hundred of them. The color and brilliance was a feast.

She reached in to hold up her accomplishments. As she laid it across her breasts, I could see her mind go to another place.

There was no image of my disciplinarian, no trace of her prominent scowl when I mispronounced an herb or forgot a salutary phrase in a different idiom. In place of all these things was contentment. These quilts and coverings were her brilliant contributions to her root.

“Grandmother, when did you make all of these?”

“I have done these as far back as I can remember. I do not remember a time that I did not quilt. When I was a young girl, as you are, I dreamed of these very quilts that you are holding... I thought that they would make me a very rich woman. So, everyday, after studying, I would run off and sew with the elders. They encouraged me and made me feel as if each one were a true work of art. It was fulfilling, so I continued.”

My fingers ran across the surface of the coverlet. I could feel the stitching and the hours of time that must have gone into ensuring that no thread was misplaced.

“My child, it is important that you cultivate your true craft. God has given you a special gift that is not assigned by your occupation. This gift will help you with your daily tasks. Each of the quilts that you hold has warmed the body of a pregnant woman. I believe that the spirits that flow through them reach the unborn and carry safely into this world. I learned this from experience...”

Her voice lingered off and I wondered what she meant. It is not wise to question your elders, so I stare at her hoping that my eyes entreated her to continue.

“Before you were born,” she answered my wishes, “your mother lost so many children. We prayed with each pregnancy

that she would be well. That the child would join us here. I grew anxious with one particular birth. As her time grew near I came to this hut and grabbed this quilt..." holding up a crimson fabric, her eyes rose to meet mine.

"This is responsible for your safe arrival to us. It was then that I knew my gift was truly sent from God."

I could not help but smile. I did not know that my birth had been so special.

"My gift has brought you to me, as well as your brother, and many other children from the surrounding villages."

She smiled. I knew this smile. It was the same as my mother's when she spoke of the medicine man for Northern Sudan. This smile was the truth and it told of joy.

"Grandmother, I did not know that what I have inside me could impact others..." I was smiling too.

It had been revealed to me that we are each given something that can bring forth life from others. We are responsible to one another.

This intimacy that was shared with my Grandmother in her tiny hut helped me to continue with my studies. And each day, after I was done, I ran off into the woods to sing with the crickets and the humming birds.

Four years later, my Grandmother died. I was deeply saddened. Not only was I sad, but I was not sure that I was ready for the responsibility that had been bestowed upon me at birth.

I was seventeen years old, and left my parents' home to live in her old hut. It still smelled of shea and cacao. It was still the home of her quilts.

Late one evening, I could hear the sound of a boat docking against the riverside.

I went to the door and pulled back the tapestry that was once hidden away in the trunk. I could see on the horizon two figures.

As they grew closer to my abode, I saw an older man from my native village and her daughter. She must have been about 10 years old.

When they reached me, I looked at the young brown child. Tears were streaming down her face and this was a fear that I recognized. It was the same fear that I felt when my Grandmother died.

Her father was obviously angered with her and wanted to discipline her actions. But with what was planned for her, he knew that he should refrain.

He brought her to me to have her circumcised. It was customary and expected that several years prior to marriage, the young girl would have this done and be ready for her wedding day, ready to take her place and consummate the ceremony.

This was my first circumcision. I had not expected that it would be this traumatic on a young girl. She was terrified, as was I.

I had prepared the cutting paraphernalia and burned the small stones that the procedure occurs.

I could hear her separated breaths, and felt her heartbeat against my chest as I took her into my arms.

I turned away from her so that she would not be frightened of the tools. Even still, this scared her more.

I could hear the phrases of an African lullaby that my Grandmother sang to me. I thought where is this coming from?

This was for only an instance. Soon, I recognized the harmony and tone. The sound was coming from me. It was my own voice. I sang to this petrified person.

She looked into my eyes when I turned around, and she smiled. Her face, while she knew that she was to be forever changed by this procedure, was lightened and it was as if her soul was touched.

My song put her at ease.

It was at this moment that I remembered the words of my Grandmother on that day that she opened the stamyug trunk. I understood that the gifts that we are bore will in some way benefit us and humanity.

As I circumcised this youth, I knew that she must have been in extreme agony. The hymn continued and it transported both of us to another place. We were taken from our presence and moved to another level of spirituality.

This young warrior did not cry or yell any longer. I thought that she must have been in shock. But there was a type of peace drawn from her being that made her calm and still.

I helped her get to this place. I had helped her move beyond the pain.

By the time we were done, my juvenile patient was relieved I am sure, but more of a complete human being than when she had arrived. Not because she had this procedure, but instead because she knew that you could remove yourself from any situation. While her vessel was being in a sense mutilated, she was on a higher plane and was not harmed from the journey.

When we were done, I too was a different person. Now I know where the song in my heart comes from and the reason for my gift. It is to bring hope. My song is here to bring hope.

Dwayne Betts

Always Remember This

everything & our hands
 cold & wet from shared
cantaloupe slices, or
 those hands washing
each other against secrets
 buried inside the lavender
petals of –who cares what
 flower it was, only important
that it was a Sunday, the light
 shining through window panes
onto a plate of pancakes! I
 never could cook, or
think past the romance
 of a rose, until your hand pressed
against the glass –pointing –there,
 & so what if this sounds
like a dream: it was a morning in
 Karibu of all places, & then
an afternoon in Everlasting Life,
 the noise in my ears so loud
I had to wrestle with my own
 demons for this dance, truth is
I married you the morning
 we slid a ring onto your finger,
as if for practice, & you smiled at me,
 the smile another streak of light,
a kiss, water rinsing over our
 hands cupped together

beneath a waterfall, & if
 we haven't been there yet, we'll go
on the strength I gather from
 your laughs, we'll ride the wild
imagination of one moment
 to the next, cause we know
this life we have together is just
 the swirling reflection
of a story told in tea leaves,
 what God has whispered
to warm our cupped hands.

Sketches of Spain

Your hands a soft heat
that cradles my chin.
My jaw rests in the crook
of your thumb, like holding
a pencil that loops and scrawls
landscape dense with doubt
against duende's father.

Jolts jump across
fingertips, balance
on bottom lip ledge
like Gibraltar kissing Morocco,
like Seville winking at the Atlantic.

There are swells racing
footfalls in my chest
as if Pamplona dressed
me in red despite bulls
running at us heavy,
but careful as flamenco
skirt turn or castanet click.

Sometimes, you admit
Miles pulls at you to sculpt
hips, waist, thighs, breasts.
My face mimics
Portugal while Madrid
and Barcelona fan out
into cities of my hair
across your pillow.

Cole Lavalais

Missus

“Mrs. Moon, am I going to get something to eat today?”

I eyed the empty plate in front of him. “That depends.”

“On what?” He made a teepee with his palms and rested his chin on the top of his fingers. There was a small dark circle centered on the backside of his hand. The smells bubbling up from the steaming pots on the stove wrapped around both of us.

“Whether Lucille got a place set for you down at her table.”

The teepee closed into a prayer, and my eyes focused on the perfect little brown circle.

“Mrs. Moon I’m going out for a smoke, and I expect on my return to have a full plate in front of me and a closed mouth across from me.” He pushed away from the table and glided out the door.

Si had a way of walking that suggested his feet never touched the ground. It had been one of the things that had made me think I loved him. But right now I don’t think I could of been any madder, watching him walk out like I hadn’t said a word. The screen door hung open behind him. Empty space filled with the stink of my husband’s favorite cologne. I knew it would be way pass suppertime by the time he rolled that shiny tin can back toward home. He drove slowly over the powdery red clay that led to the road. Anything to keep rocks from popping up and harming his precious Packard. He paid more attention to that hunk of metal than he did to me. At least lately. He might be gone, but old big fat Lucille was still here. She was here as clear as if she was setting up

on Mother Moon's prize settee. The screen slammed shut. The sound echoed through the mahogany paneled rooms. Si's boys. I had almost forgotten them. Pushing passed the overstuffed furniture in the front parlor, I rushed to the boys' room. I peeked around the door and saw them, still and sleeping. They looked just like what they were, smaller versions of their father. Hawkins and Ellington had sure enough come out of me, but with each passing day they were more his. At the age of four Hawkins was already talking rough around the edges, just like his father, when he asked me for something. Beating him didn't seem to help. Even the baby, Ellington, had my hands and full lips, but the rest of him belonged to Si. Big heads covered with curly hair. Skin the color of new baby shit. Dark, almond-shaped eyes that were almost too close together. It didn't take much to recognize a Moon Boy. That head and those eyes were always the first sign. It had taken all day to get those two down for a nap and here I go slamming doors. Thank the Lord it didn't wake them.

Closing their bedroom door, Si's study stood wide open in front of me. Coleman was calling to me. Couldn't stop the evil smile that grew up out of my middle and stretched across my face. I went in. Made sure to quietly close the door behind me. He was the only thing that could push Lucille off that settee, out my door, and on up the road. Si's desk was a mess as usual, stacked high with ledgers and books and cigars. The King chair, as I called it behind his back, sat on the other side. That chair was just about the ugliest thing Si had ever brought into this house, but you couldn't tell him that. With the too high back, red velvet seat, and muddy gold trim, it looked like something that belonged up on the altar in one of those high faluting churches up North. When Si sat in it, he looked more like a court jester than a king, but that wasn't none of my business no how cause there was only one place I cared about in the whole dusty room. And it was

the credenza. The only clean place in the whole study was the top of the mahogany chest. It's where Mother Moon sat. God rest her worrisome soul. Her final resting place was just about as ugly as Si's King chair, but then he had been the one to pick it out. A picture of her sat right next to the urn. Those eyes too close together glared at me before I laid her face down and reached under the urn. The key.

"Why thank you Mother Moon." I unlocked the credenza and began to search for him. Seem like Si had moved all the gospel to the front. But I found him anyway. Coleman Hawkins was my absolute all-time favorite. Probably because he had been my first.

We was having supper over to Emmanuel's, Si's brother, the first time I heard him. I was expecting Si's oldest boy at the time. Emmanuel had just gotten a brand new radio and had invited half the congregation over to show it off. We was all gathered around the radio in the parlor, listening to some sort of variety hour. There were singers and musicians. They even had tap dancers. But it wasn't until I heard this thing that I really started listening. At first I thought it was a woman crying. I mean that's how sad it sounded, like an actual woman crying, then the sad turned to glad, and it was all I could do not to jump up and start jitter bugging. Even the baby in my belly felt like it was jitter bugging the minute that horn started. Lucky me I caught myself cause everybody else was acting like that horn wasn't nothing special. Not wanting to seem like I didn't know nothing, I did the same. Wasn't till everything was over that I got a chance to talk to Emmanuel.

"Brother, who is that?"

"That is none other than Coleman Hawkins. The finest Negro saxophone player to ever pick up the instrument."

Now he had a name and what a fine name it was. On the drive home I couldn't stop thinking about Coleman Hawkins and his saxophone.

“Si, you know what you need? A radio. Just like Brother’s. You having such a successful business, it just don’t look right, him having finer things than you.”

Si looked over at me, and then looked back toward the road.

“I guess it wouldn’t do for you to get such a fine radio so close after Brother got his. Why I reckon he would think you were trying to one up him?”

We were stopped at the only traffic signal in town when I screamed out in glee.

“I got it Si. A phonograph, now that would be perfect.”

On his very next trip back from Birmingham, we had us a brand new handcrafted phonograph. But all Si had brought home with it was records full of folks wailing and crying and calling on the Lord. If I heard one more down home spiritual I think my soul was apt to bust right out of my body and take off to heaven to hear it first hand. By this time my belly was swole up tight with baby, and I wasn’t getting around so good. One Sunday afternoon, me and Si was sitting in the parlor, listening to the phonograph.

“White folks sure is funny. Charlene say that her white folks don’t play nothing but that Jazz music when they have callers. Remember Brother Emmanuel talking bout that one, I believe Coleman Hawkins was his name. I don’t know about white folks, but Gospel is good enough for little old me. I don’t need none of what them rich folks need.”

Si didn’t say nothing. But next thing, he carrying home every record he can find, starting with Coleman Hawkins.

When the baby was born I named him Hawkins. Told Si that Hawkins was my great grandfather’s name and I had promised momma on her deathbed to name my first born for him. Used my daddy’s daddy for Ellington, cause that’s when Duke Ellington and his band had really started to jump. Some might say my way was wrong, something close to lying, but Si had his ways too. He couldn’t hardly stand for a

woman to tell him nothing. When we first got married seem like he couldn't wait to find out what I wanted before he was running out to do the exact opposite. Well, that was a lesson I learned real quick. So I can't see how any right-minded person could fault me. And why most folks think you got to look in a graveyard for name that's special anyhow? Far as I know you can't get no more special than a name like Coleman Hawkins.

It had been years since that time at Brother Emmanuel's, but my hand still shook a little when I placed the needle along the groove in the vinyl. It started off soft and slow. I imagined it must be what love must sound like. The vibrations trickled through me, forcing my eyes close. His horn blew right through me, becoming a part of the thing that squeezed my heart, making my blood flow. Knocking at my front door pushed my eyes open. I closed them again, hoping that whatever they were selling they'd get the idea and keep moving. But they didn't get the idea, and pretty soon the knocking was followed by my sister's high-pitched voice, calling my name. I jumped up to keep Charlene's cat wailing from waking the boys.

"Gal, what you doing knocking on my door like the barn's on fire?"

Charlene walked past me, ignoring the anger in my eyes. Her brown face held a more pinched look than usual.

"Aren't you going to offer me a seat?" She was sweating, which wasn't unusual for folks in Alabama, but it was unusual for Charlene. She made it a practice to leave at least thirty minutes early to any of her appointments, so she would never have to rush, and she would always appear moisture free. Obviously this visit wasn't one of her planned appointments. "Maybe you should sit down too, dear." We were both settled in the parlor before Charlene heard the music. "Livia, what are you listening to?" Her eyes told me I should be ashamed, but then they switched back to being

pinched again.

“Where’s Silas?” There she go, always trying to start something.

“In town buying cigars.”

“Well, I just came from a visit with Mother Janie. You know she lives over down by the creek.” Charlene started to smooth her dress down over her knees. “Well she hasn’t been feeling so well lately, being well past 80 and seeing as all her folks done moved up north, the Pastor asked us to look in on her every now and then. Well, she may be weak in body, but her mind is as sharp as a whip.”

I wished she would get on with it. Lord knows my sister was long-winded and usually I didn’t mind, but I could hear Coleman’s next song starting up, and the boys would be up soon.

“She remembers the time you and Silas gave her that ride home from service about a month back, and she talks about how nice the car was. She wanted to know if you and Silas had been called to minister to that awful Lucille.”

The saxophone faded, and Charlene came back into focus. “Sister, what was that you say again?”

“I said Mother Janie was wondering what business you and Silas had up at Lucille’s house, that would keep that fancy car running pass her place all the time.”

I could feel the blood leaving my face. Here it was again. Here it was, and even a half- blind old woman could see it. “Is he there now?”

“Mother Janie say she was sure that the car had come on past her house just moments before I got there. She thought we were riding together.”

“Sister, don’t worry your head about that. Silas just fulfilling his Christian duty to that old evil woman. I’m sorry I can’t visit with you longer, but me and those boys got to get on up the road. I’m out of meal, and Si cain’t hardly stand a supper with no cornbread.”

“Are you sure? I’ll be happy ta...”

I grabbed Charlene by her arm and guided her toward the door. “Charlene, I’ll be fine. You just run on home, and get Tom’s dinner.” Charlene was still talking when I closed the door behind her. It took me awhile to find the dish. Mother Moon had given it to me before she died. Si said it was real silver and had been handmade in Europe. He was so proud of it and insisted that it be kept in a deserving condition. So I had put it in the back of the china cabinet and covered it with my mother’s lace tablecloth. But once I found the tarnished dish it only took a few minutes for me to pack up Silas’s dinner and cover it before waking the boys.

“Come on boys. We got to take your daddy his dinner.” They both began to whine on cue. “I already got plenty to tote. Don’t make me add a switch to the list.” The mention of a switch quieted both boys. They trailed after me, still not quite awake. Snot dripped from Ellington’s nose. I wiped it with the back of my hand and wiped my hand on my skirt, while balancing that tray on my knee.

“We’ll be headed back home after while,” I said. “Stop fussing, hear?”

Ellington shook his head up and down and sniffed.

“Now ya’ll come on. Your Daddy’s waiting.”

“Where Daddy?” Hawkins had picked up a stick and was whacking the rows of cattails that lined the dirt path toward Lucille’s place.

“Up the road.” I knew it was a certain amount of something that a wife, a God-fearing wife, had to endure. But not even Momma could have looked around a fat atrocity of a woman like Lucille.

“What he doing?” Hawkins bent down and picked up a lump of red clay at the foot of a lump of evergreens. Before he stood up the lump was dust in his hands.

“I reckon we gone find out.” Could Si have found anyone worse to humiliate me with. Didn’t the Mrs. mean anything

to him? He had been the one to erase my Christian name and replace it with Mrs. Moon, so shouldn't he have to honor that?

"I'm hungry." Hawkins traced crooked lines in the dirt behind him. "Daddy gone have candy?"

Si used to bring me candy too, now it's just for the boys. He can't come through the door without those boys jumping all over him and searching every pocket until they got a hold of every piece he's hidden on himself. The first time I saw him I was staring at a heaping batch of fudge Sister Mary had just placed out over at Wallace's. I knew I had to eat that fudge with my eyes cause there wasn't no way that Poppa would even consider buying it for me. We was out the store and loading up the truck by the time Si had glided up to us, tipped his hat to me and Poppa, and handed me the biggest package of fudge I had ever seen in my life.

It had been like that up until the wedding. I couldn't hardly want something before Si was buying it for me. Then after we was married seem like all that stopped. Not my wanting, just Si's giving. He even stopped calling me Olivia. The first time I could remember him calling me Mrs. Moon was on our wedding night. It made my stomach break into a million pieces and dance. Now, five years later, walking two miles in the heat to Si's outside woman's lean-to, being Mrs. Moon felt like a yoke pulling down my insides. But all I know right now is I am Mrs. Silas Moon. That might not stand for love, at least not no more, or even trust, but it was supposed to mean respect. Shoot, even white folks down at the bank talked real quiet to me when I was on Si's arm. And now Si was determined to stop giving me that too.

Ellington began to howl. When I looked back Hawkins had the stick ready to poke him for what couldn't have been the first time. Hawkins looked up at me and dropped one end of the stick to the ground. He was still dragging it behind him, when we walked into Lucille's piece of yard. Ellington

was in a full cry by then, so I put the platter down in the dirt and picked him up. Hawkins was hanging on the bottom of my dress, not making a sound. His eyes were locked onto that old clapboard shack.

“Lucille, where my husband?” I waited. “Lucille, I say where my husband?” Louder that time. No movement behind the curtains and Ellington was starting to get heavy on my hip. I put him down and picked up the food. “Lucille my husband like his dinner hot, so please send Si out so I can give it to him the way he like it.” The shack was as still as it was when I first came in the yard, then I heard the cackling. It sounded as if someone was sitting on a two-headed hen. Loud and full. I looked up and there was Lucille. All 300 pounds of her. Wondered how all that was able to sneak up on that porch without me hearing it. Parts of her body started to move independent of each other as that two-headed hen sounded off again.

“Well, well, look like little Missus finally got the call.”

“Lucille I know he up in there. If you know what’s best for you, you’ll send him out.”

I could hear cackling, but I didn’t see her lips move. It seemed to be coming from somewhere deep inside of her, like maybe she was hiding that two-headed chicken between those fat thighs.

“I see you looking at me wondering what your husband want with an old, ugly, fat thing like me.” Lucille waited. I wasn’t sure if it was for effect or if she really wanted me to respond. “Missus, you don’t really want to know.”

“No Lucille, you wrong. I would like to know.” The sun was forcing the sweat from my pores and Hawkins was clinging to my hand. His eyes never left Lucille’s huge moving body.

“We got us a brave one this time. Missus, what me and yo husband do up in my house would scare you.” A thin white cigarette was mashed between her chunky fingers. It

was a store bought one too. Not like the hand-rolled ones most folks around here smoked. She stuck it in her mouth and began to suck on it. The perfect round tip of the little white stick glowed. “If you know what’s best for you, you’ll pick up that plate and those babies and go on home and make sho there’s a hot dinner on your table when he get there. Hell you need to be making one for me.” She smiled as if she was reading my mind. “I’m keeping the devil out yo house.” She plucked that cigarette from between her lips and pressed it down hard on the front of the porch post. A perfect dark brown circle remained in the weathered wood long after she moved her fat hand away.

A chill followed the beads of sweat rolling down my back. “Seem to me there wasn’t no devil in my house before you Lucille.” My voice sounded uneven in my head.

“What seems to be ain’t always what is. Go on home and sleep good tonight. Leave yo nightmares up to old ugly fat Lucille, I take care of all ‘em for you.” She looked at me, flicked that cigarette out into the yard, and turned back into her door. “Go on home Missus Moon and leave the dark to me.”

A coldness moved through me as the old porch creaked with release as she stepped back inside the shack and closed the door behind her.

I don’t know how long I was standing there when a loud thump made me turn towards Si’s Packard. It was Hawkins. He had cracked the stick across the black hood and was raising it to hit the car again. Without thinking I balanced the tray on my hip and snatched the stick from Hawkins’ hand. I ran my hand across that shiny hood, checking for a mark or scratch, but all I saw was my face, the edges swallowed up by the Packard’s blackness. The car was unscarred, as smooth as when Si had driven it up Lucille’s dirt road, past Mother Janie’s place, and away from our home. I dropped Hawkins’ stick and held the dish full of baked chicken,

candied yams, and butter beans as high over my head as I could. Then I dropped it. With all my strength, I dropped that tray onto the hood of Mr. Moon's Packard. Me, Hawkins, and Ellington watched as that real expensive imported silver bounced off that shiny piece of nothing and landed in the dirt. The shiny blackness was almost completely drowned by my good cooking, but even through that mess of butterbeans and candied yams I could see the dent.

I smiled at the boys, and my silent children smiled back. I picked up Ellington and held Hawkins hand as we walked back home. An hour later Si was up at the well washing those butter beans off his hood and I had restarted the fire back under the pots on the stove. The boys, still unusually quiet, played in the parlor. I went into the study, put a record on the phonograph, and sat right down in Si's King chair.

Si came in and paused at the study door before sitting down to a supper serenaded by the woeful tones of Coleman Hawkins.

Gail Upchurch

The Lovers

I learned how to love from my mother. She had a man, never a husband, who never promised to stay. Perhaps if she loved him sweet enough like apple cobbler he would have wanted to stay. After all they had made people, two people. Wouldn't that be enough to make him stay? She shared her bed with him. Weren't her slim thighs enough for him stay? The fried bologna sandwiches with mayonnaise? His favorite rot gut beer in the refrigerator awaiting his return?

Keep your eyes open and love your man

The alternative was loneliness. The loneliness that reached up and coiled around her like a vine.

Keep your eyes open and love your man.

*

Up until my parents broke, my life had been fairly simple. I knew a couple of things for certain. For one, playing with my sister Jain was ultimately necessary for my survival. And two, my parents would be together forever, however fraught their relationship might have been. So when my mother asked him to leave, my understanding about the world and the people in it was changed forever.

My father was a man who didn't walk. Instead, he blew in and out of places like mild breeze. You never knew exactly when he was coming, but when he did you welcomed him. That was how it was with my mother. My father's very nature was ephemeral, but in spite of it, maybe because of it, she loved him. They were woven together like tapestry. He was all the ornate squiggly stitches, while my mother provided the borders, reinforced with strong straight seams. Everyone loves the ornament; most people ignore the finishing hem.

His face was brown like toast, and he had freckles stippled on the bridge of his nose like God blew pepper on his face. He smelled of Newports and cheap, frothy beer the color of apple juice. His voice was a train running, loud and fast. And when he cussed, it was with just the right beat, a rhythm that could either make you tremble or giggle. “Motherfucker,” ran off his tongue slick like vegetable oil.

He never seemed to have any regular job, not like my mother at least. He never worked the kind of job that had him drinking a cup of Folgers and stirring in Half ’n Half over the morning newspaper. But my father always had money. Folded in dirty halves in the back pocket of his jeans. The dirty halves he would pull out and offer to me or to Jain whenever we needed a little. He’d reach back there and bring out the warm fold, lick his thumb and begin flicking off dollars. “One, two, three.” Three dollars was enough for me. One dollar was enough for Jane. My great-aunt Oranges thought for sure that he was involved in something illegal. She would let some things creep from her mouth years after he was gone about running numbers and ripping people off, things about him getting put out of business once folks started playing the lottery.

And to him, people were either initials, the beginnings of names like me who was “L,” Jain who was “J” and mother who was “B.” Or they fit in the other category of associates he called “cat,” “dude,” “fool,” or my favorite vegetable oiled “motherfucker.” When he called our names I always wanted to snap my fingers, like one would do with a Donna Somers record.

“What’s hangin’ L, (snap) you wanna run to the store with me?”

or

“Little J, (snap) let Daddy do that for you (snap).”

or

“Hey B, (snap) give me some suga’, Baby (snap).”

He used to kiss our cheeks in a way that left the distant smell of cigarettes. Jain would wipe hers away with her shoulder; I would save mine, let it dry there and soak in. How could I have known then what a gift it was to have my father's kiss dry on my cheek?

I used to see my mother's face empty like a bowl without plums when he went away. Sometimes he was gone for one night, some times two or three. I thought, maybe, that was just what daddies do. They were around some and gone some. I thought about this later, not then: it is impossible to catch a breeze in a jar.

*

The day my mother fell down on our front lawn like an autumn leaf was the last day we saw him there. As usual, he had been gone for days, and my mother's face was a hollow cave.

The school day morning had carried on as usual, with my mother threatening to whip our legs if we didn't hurry up. She hurriedly brushed up our kinky, brown hair into quick buns and threw high-waist dresses over our heads. She walked out of the front door first and Jain and I tagged each other. That was until my mother stopped suddenly. We stopped right on her heels and stopped goofing around long enough to see what she was staring at. It was my daddy, looking clean and refreshed in jeans and a crisp blue shirt. He was coming down the street calmly. With a kind of swagger even. I had wondered where he was coming from so early in the morning and where he had been for so many days.

"Girls, get in the car." She guided us toward the silver Buick with a firm hand on my shoulder and a gentle shove for Jain.

"Can we say 'Hi' to Daddy?" I asked.

"No, not right now. Maybe after you come home from school."

Mother hurriedly walked to the car and opened the back door for us to get in.

“Get in your safety belts, girls. I’ll be right back.”

By that time, my father had made it to the front of the house. He stooped down to wave at Jain and me in the back seat. He smiled big and wide at us and blew us kisses. Jain did the best she could to blow one back and I just grinned. My stomach was uneasy. I felt for my daddy the way I did for Jain or myself just before mother was going to give us a whipping.

“Let’s sing BINGO, Lila,” Jain demanded. She had tugged on my arm just the way I had hated her to do. Her little nail beds only partially covered with red nail polish, the rest chipped up from long use.

“Don’t want to right now. Maybe later.”

“But, but--I want to sing it now, Lila!”

“No, Jain. Later, you stupid rag. Just shut up now.”

“You don’t tell me what to do.”

“Oh okay, just be quiet.”

“And Bingo was his name-o. B-I-N-G-O, B-I-N-G-O—”

“Jesus, Jain! Wouldja just—”

“Oooh, I’m tellin’ Mommy you said ‘Jesus.’”

I tried as hard as I could to listen to what they were talking about through the thick automobile windows and over Jain’s singing. It was faint, but I remember their words.

“You sure do look clean, Johnny. Unh, unh, unh. I think she really takes care of you. Real good.” I saw my mother walk real close to him then. “Camay soap. Nice and sweet, huh John? It looks like she really knows how to treat her man.” She looked to be sniffing him. He distanced himself, uncomfortably smirking.

“I’m sorry, baby. This ain’t right,” he started shaking his head in shame, lowering his eyes to the ground. “I know—I know it ain’t right.”

Mother glanced in our direction briefly. “They’re sitting there right in the car, Johnny. And here you go sauntering down the street, feeling nice and relaxed, nice and laid.” I saw my daddy try to touch her arm. My mother, seemingly repulsed went on: “You know. I tried it. I tried it, but I’m about sick and tired of this kind of disrespect.”

He advanced, trying to take her whole body into his. For an embrace. He began to whisper something in her ear. Mother refused him, pushed him off, and held her arm straight out in front of her telling him to “stop.”

“No, no, no, no, no. We agreed that at least you could be home by the time the girls woke up. Now look at you. It just looks like I’ve given you too much space to run around. We haven’t seen you in days, Johnny. In days!”

He began to pull her again. She was trying to move toward the car and yank her arm away from him. The harder she pulled, the more convinced my daddy got that she shouldn’t leave.

Meanwhile, in the car, while our parents tussled on the lawn, “(Clap) (Clap) N-G-O, (Clap) (Clap) N-G-O.” Understanding that I would not get Jain to cooperate with me, I pressed my face to the window, my insides were all tight like dried paste. I could hardly breathe.

“Stop it, Johnny! What the hell is wrong with you!” Mother had raised her voice a bit because I could hear it clearly through the car window.

“I want you gone, Johnny. That’s it. And don’t you say a slim word to Oranges when you go in there to pack your shit.” She broke away from him, and in so doing fell on the grass. Her composure completely destroyed, she sat and cried there.

I wanted to get out. I touched the handle of the car door. Jain, perhaps noticing that we had been sitting motionless for a while, peered out. “Mommy fell?”

“Shut up, you stupid rag,” My eyes were fixed on

mother's defeated body, a body of crumpled, dirty bed linen. And my daddy standing above her, casting a shadow. After that, no more was said. Only their poses: the guilty and the defeated.

"Well, I don't wanna shut up. 'There was a farmer who had a dog and Bingo was his name-o!'" Jain began the song from the beginning.

I didn't know what I should do, so I did nothing. I let the burgundy upholstery hold my butt while my mother collected her body from the lawn. My father helped her up, offering his hand. He tried to kiss her, but she turned her face away as if she were to sneeze and ambled to the car. Daddy told me to roll down the window of the car with his arm. Once Jain felt the breeze on her cheek she stopped singing.

"Hey, Daddy."

"Hey Little J." He stooped down so that his face was next to ours.

"And you, Little L. You cool?"

"Um hm." I looked at my lap and flecked dirt out from underneath my fingernails.

"Okay, then, ya'll. I'll see you soon, okay?"

I nodded while Jain just looked at him.

Mother poured into the front seat of the car. Her body was the scent of Jean Nate. Her hair, once a neat, tight up-roll, was a disheveled loose afro puff at the back of her head. Her face was wet with a relationship's end.

"Does Daddy have to leave?" I asked. He stood up and kissed his index and middle fingers and stuck them on the roof of the car with a soft thud.

"Yes, baby. But don't worry about that. Roll up the window."

"Daddy's leaving?" Jain asked.

"Yes, baby, but you don't worry about that either."

She flicked on the radio to WXXO, and began to listen to Irene Cara. Mother just sang along quietly, sniffing. Jain

continued her rendition of BINGO. I flicked dirt. Then we pulled off for school. I looked at my father through the back window and watched his body get smaller until I couldn't see him anymore.

Thinking back, my parents tussling out in front of the house that day must have been my biggest lesson of what lovers do.

Mitchell L. H. Douglas

Tallahatchie

(for Emmett Till & Marilyn Nelson)

What are the odds?

One week after teaching Marilyn's crown
for Emmett, I crawl
on I-65 behind a white pickup
behind a white pickup
w/ Mississippi plates, the county
Tallahatchie.

It helps for dramatic effect
that we are witnessing a lightning
storm, the two lanes narrow
to one, & I won't let anyone
cut between me
& the white truck.

The white lightning, I cannot control.

I examine the contents
of the truck bed: tool box—
silver, textured; a cart upturned,
its wheels raised in surrender. No
cotton gin fans, no barbed wire
clues. Just my pen
scribbling in a Moleskine, a verse
for the dead, the living,
& the mourning
at 30 miles per hour.

The truck is the same race
as the driver & passenger—one
navigator, one witness—
the same race as the student
who said, *This poem is racist,*
its continued references
to the word white are all negative
(Marilyn's not mine).

How the highway works:
speed, lines, a left
lane for passing
some barely driving—
or passing—never
leave. The classroom,
no safer.

Melanie Michelle Henderson

Patron (a sketch)

A gray angle
Harsh white light coasts at its feet
Hidden under a fat drunken squat
A world balancing on its open mouth
Green grass, green grass
Silver, bling, some numbers
Inscribed like lockup suit tags
Character and painterly anonymity
Outlined in glitter
Vomit gestured in its gut
—there inlays depth
Acidic life gulps.

Adrian Matejka

Johnson Does Roadwork at Seal Rock

on a blue day, the ocean clear
as smelling salts. George Little

huffed along, pacing me
like a locomotive missing

its locomotion. My lungs,
a couple of hot skilletts, but on a day

with that kind of blue,
it didn't matter much. Three

white girls played hopscotch
in dresses most folks keep

for Sunday. I gave them my gold
smile, waved as we passed.

The girls looked a little frightened
at first, but soon skipped after,

singing under a sun yellowing
like salted fish: *Nigger, nigger,*

never die. Black face & shiny eye.

Amanda Johnston

BUCKLE

I used to play dress-up. Sport
my mother's evening gowns.
Smear shadows across my face.
Sashay down the hallway,
my waist synched with leather
to a negative.

I talked back.
Folks knew I was trouble.

Pregnant at thirteen.
Again at sixteen.

I-told-you-so was never uttered. We knew
somehow my mother had failed us.

My friends learned the cut of belts
as children. Wild lashings to the back,
legs and face. But they knew
it was for the greater good.
I envied them.

Pregnant at thirteen.
Again at sixteen.

I have two daughters who play dress-up
in jewelry, heels and red lipstick. But I am
a good mother, I have learned the cut of belts.
They will flinch when I enter the room.

Tacuma Roeback

First, Best Memory

Harvey laughed in his old man eyes as he watched the football game on television. He thought about the boy who would become his son. His smile flattens when he thinks this: That was the closest we ever was.

The game he remembers didn't happen on a screen. It happened at Washington Park, a flat expanse of dead grass and leaning trees that stretched for three city blocks, dead smack in the middle of a place called Mercy City. Ten nappy-headed boys were playing on that field. They had a five-on-five game going. One team was throttling the other one. That conquering team was well coordinated, for a group of teenagers. Their young big-armed quarterback, a kid named Chet, was throwing spirals that cut through the air over and above the other team's shorter, over-matched players.

The kid Chet had the body of a 20-year-old man, although he couldn't have been more than 15, Harvey surmised at that time. He wore a black jersey with a silver "32." Each ball he threw seemed to land comfortably in the hands of his fleet, lanky-legged receivers.

Harvey had walked over to the park after checking up on a row house he just bought across the street. He was impressed with Chet. On one play the boy through a big bomb to one of his gazelle receivers who ran all the way to the large tree branch sticking out of the ground, their makeshift touchdown marker.

When the other team's turn came, the game morphed from one of symphonic precision to one of madcap chaos. The other team's, skinny, brown-skinned quarterback had arms that were no bigger than pencils. The brown-and-white striped ball looked like a missile in Chet's hands; but in this

kid's, it wobbled in the air like a bad paper airplane. The quarterback on the bad team had a mouth on him too.

"Where the fuck you goin', man. Go short, man. Short. You retarded or something," he yelled out to his wobbly receiver.

"You wasn't gettin' me the ball," the receiver shot back.

As much as Harvey was impressed with Chet, he only felt pity at the receiver the bad quarterback was berating. The freckled kid was all arms and legs. He couldn't run in a straight line without knocking his knees and elbows. He couldn't catch. Harvey blushed at all the abuse he was getting. When the boys started arguing, that became Harvey's perfect opening. The two boys started going at each other. Their teammates were telling them to shut up. They were all getting laughed at by the other team.

"Fucking scrub, I should play receiver," said the loudmouth quarterback.

"You gotta learn to play quarterback first, boy," Harvey stepped right between the two boys who were standing chin-to-chin under a tall maple.

"Who are you? Ain't the senior citizen home open on Sundays?"

"Yeah, but this 44 year old senior can throw a better ball than you," Harvey shot back.

The kid frowned at him and tossed him the ball. Chet came over.

"With all due respect, Mister, I don't think your boys are ready for us."

Harvey looked over at his teammates; they either had their hands on their hips or were staring down at the grass.

"We ain't scared of you boys," Harvey lied. "C'mon, ya'll, you wanna let these boys make ya'll look like that?" The boys just stood around looking at each other. Their loudmouth quarterback strolled to the sideline with folded

arms.

“Let’s see what you chumps do with Bill Cosby over here.”

Harvey called his boys into a huddle.

“You, I need you to go short. Be my safety valve, if I can’t get it down the field,” he said to the team’s tallest, huskiest kid, who had on gray sweatpants and a white, grass-stained “I Love NY” sweatshirt.

“You,” Harvey called to a short kid with braces and a black baseball cap. “Go medium. Let me show you.”

Harvey traced an imaginary pattern on his left palm, a pattern that looked like he was drawing the letter “C.”

“You’re gonna cross me, go all the way right and cut back across the field the opposite way.”

“You two-” Harvey directed his words to kid he pitied and one who wore a white headband with a number “34” scrawled in black magic marker.

He pulled the two kids to him. “You two are gonna be my deep threats.”

“Walter Payton,” he said to the kid wearing the headband, “You’re just gonna run deep out, as far as you can.”

He pulled out his hand for the sad receiver, who tried his best to ignore the taunts of his nemesis, the bad quarterback standing on the sideline.

“You jus’ gonna fuck up again,” the loudmouth yelled out to him.

“Hey, don’t pay attention to him. Look at my hand. I want you to stay on my right. When you run, you’re gonna draw a big number 7 on the field. Soon as you complete that 7, shoot out in the other direction. As fast as you can, boy.”

The slighted, freckled kid shook his head obediently. The team took to the line with their new quarterback.

“Ya’ll still ain’t gonna do shit,” said the jerk on the sidelines.

“Never mind him,” Harvey reassured the boys. The kid

with the “34” headband and the one with the black baseball cap lined up on Harvey’s left. The boy with the white sweatshirt and the freckled kid lined up to the right.

“Set. Hike.”

Chet, the big-armed kid from the other team, hiked the ball.

Harvey, in his light brown corduroys, matching loafers and dark brown wool sweater, rolled out of the pocket as if he had been playing the game for years—in dress clothes. Chet raised his arms and moved wherever Harvey went.

“One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi.”

The kid with the “34” headband ran too deep, too fast. Plus the kid covering him from the other team was all over him. The baseball cap wearing boy ran the right pattern, but he was in the same exact area as the kid with the “I Love NY” sweatshirt.

“Seven Mississippi. Eight Mississippi.”

Chet was creeping closer to him.

The insults from over on the sideline sounded louder.

“You suck.”

Harvey couldn’t see his other receiver over the top of Chet. He decided to toss it in the area where two of his receivers ended up.

“Nine Mississippi.”

Harvey was about to release the ball, he remembered. That’s when he felt like a pipe had busted open in his chest. Actually, it was Chet lowering his shoulder into him, leveling him to the ground. Harvey’s sternum, abdomen, his whole body, burned from that hit. His legs were splayed out. He clutched the grass with his right hand, pulling up clumps of earth. He felt the kind of pain he would always remember. His glasses were half off his face. His lip and teeth were bleeding. The top of the gold cap he wore over one of his front teeth, cut into the gum area.

“Haha, told you Cosby over there sucked,” taunted the

loudmouth quarterback over on the side.

Harvey could only look up at the clear skies and the few strings of clouds that lingered overhead. Then Chet from the other team came over. His tiny dark eyes were streaked with worry. He was spitting out a mouthful of apologies. He put out his hands to Harvey, but the older man just laid there.

“What’s wrong old man, broke a hip?” said the jerk from the sidelines.

“Yo, shut the fuck up Connie, before I kick your ass now,” said Chet.

Connie got quiet.

The other teammates hovered over Harvey. Two of the boys, the freckled kid and the one wearing the headband, finally helped him up. Harvey stumbled around dazed, but caught himself. He spat out some blood and took the cap out of his mouth. Chet walked back with his head down to an area where his other team congregated, about 10 yards away.

“We can walk you to the hospital,” said the freckled kid, standing with the three other boys.

“I don’t need no hospital, boy. Ya’ll just have to run the play right. We’re running the same play.”

He called over to the other team, who were already sitting down on the grass.

“Ya’ll come over here. We’re ready to do this.”

The kids from the other team tentatively walked over, wearing frowns of bewilderment.

Harvey’s team took the line again. They looked at their middle-aged quarterback in amazement.

“You sure you wanna do this, mister,” said Chet.

“Yeah, and don’t play soft. Bring that lumber, boy.”

Chet hiked Harvey the ball, but the old quarterback wasn’t moving around as much. The kid wearing the headband ran too deep, again. The kid with the black baseball cap ran to the right area, but the kid with the “I Love NY” sweatshirt ran

too wide this time and ended up by the sideline.

“Six Mississippi. Seven Mississippi.”

The one target left, the freckled kid, ran the “number 7” route, but darted back in the opposite direction. Harvey released the ball. It was a beautiful spiral, cutting the air like a bottle-rocket. The ball was right there in front of the smallish receiver. It was his for the taking. The boy grabbed that ball out of the air and held it -- for three seconds. He closed his eyes and his arms around air. He dropped the ball.

The other team would score four more times. But Harvey helped those boys score the first two touchdowns ever for the team, who called themselves the Giants. After the game was over, the new quarterback did ask for that walk to the hospital. Only this time, the freckled kid walked with him.

“Hey kid, what do they call you?”

“What they call me?”

“Your name?”

“Timmy. Timothy Rollins.”

“Timmy.”

“What they call you?”

“Harvey Walker.”

“Wow, you got the same initials as Herschel Walker,” said Timmy, referencing the legendary football player.

Harvey smiled and cupped his chest with his right hand.

“That’s about all we have in common,” he said.

Demetrice Anntia Worley

A Woman's Offering

This January evening, Cairo is outside
my taxi window: stalled traffic,
people walking. Shop windows illuminate
women's long dresses, men's shoes,
a 12-year-old girl licking
the taxi's windshield.

This January evening in Cairo
a girl's pink tongue slowly slides,
leaving wet arcs on dusty glass.
The three men in the taxi, an Egyptian,
an Iraqi, and an American, ignore the girl,
drone on about the war. In the noisy street,
the girl's almond eyes ask questions American
dollars and Egyptian pounds cannot answer.

This January evening in Cairo
my brown eyes, surrounded by *hijab*,
never leave the girl's face. I offer folded hands
in prayer, *Enshallah*. She nods, presses
her small lips against my window;
seals our transaction with a kiss.

David Mills

Do I Believe in G-d, No Does G-d Believe in Me?

You see my whole life is tied up to unhappiness 'cause it's the only for real thing I know. —Nikki Giovanni

My womb is silent. The rest
of my body
a foreign language: kidneys
that speak Yiddish; a ring
of bones that whisper in
Kickapoo; a mystery. Twice
I have outlived my children. I can't
imagine adopting when all I wanted was the suck
and swallow, for either of them to have turned
their mouth to my milk. But now my nipples are bricks—
large and dark as midnight;
now my womb is a brown paper
bag crumpled up and flicked from a cross-
town bus. G-d, all I wanted was a first
word's puny hallelujah. I remember
my belly, that voluptuous gust, the almost nine months—
both times--but those breezes have since shriveled.
So now when my lips are torn apart, words
like rage, hate and betrayal
fly from my mouth: loooong "A" sounds
that have me wheezing with morning
sickness; looooooong "A"
sounds that have me flirting
with the notion of opening
an agency with just one toddler
named G-d, who I'll put up
for adoption; loooong "A" sounds
that have made me think.
Twice.

Nicole Sealey

An Interview with Patricia Smith

Patricia Smith has a knack for, an exceptional ability with, words: the choices, the parings, the brevity or extensions. From *Life According to Motown and Big Towns*, *Big Talk to Close to Death* and *Teahouse of the Almighty*, Smith's dexterity does not (can not) go unnoticed—her words, the work will not allow for apathy or uniformity. Enter Patricia Smith's latest book of poems, *Blood Dazzler*.

Assuming the voice of seemingly helpless politicians, the dead and dying, the survivors, and Hurricane Katrina herself, *Blood Dazzler* reminds readers of the fragility and unpredictability of life and the trajectory and inevitability of loss. Like the coliseum where many of the displaced took refuge during the Category 5 storm, *Blood Dazzler* holds Katrina's tempestuous story and serves as a testament to that record.

Patricia Smith is a 2008 National Book Award finalist and winner of the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, the Carl Sandburg Literary Award, the National Poetry Series Award, the Patterson Poetry Award, and the Pushcart prize.

Nicole Sealey: What is your source of inspiration?

Patricia Smith: I'm inspired by all the quirky, painful, hilarious and jolting ways that life moves forward. Each day we awake and the canvas is blank again. As soon as I lift my head from my pillow, inspiration begins hurtling from every direction. What did that dream mean? There's the impression of my husband's body on the mattress next to me. The teenager is singing in the shower. The insistent

ache in my left side means I'm getting older. There's a half-empty tumbler of whiskey on the nightstand. The deep amber of the liquid looks like the rusty water that used to pool in our sink in Chicago. Chicago. My mother is there, in a pristine apartment with a snow-white carpet. She was always so clean. She would hate the clutter in this bedroom. Her bedroom was spotless. I can't imagine her ever having sex in that bedroom.

That's the way the synapses begin to fire, and they fire until the night drops on my head and I fall asleep. I'm not sure why writers aren't all babbling lunatics, talking to themselves on subways and running face-first into lightposts. There's always so much going on in our heads and hearts, so many voices begging for our attention, so many things begging to be written about and so many ways to write them.

NS: How do you decide what to write about?

PS: Subjects poke and prod at me until I begin to listen to them. I keep a little notebook with ideas, snippets of conversation, odd images, etc., but the things I wind up writing about pretty much make the decision and then clutter my path until I trip over them.

NS: As a black poet, do you feel an obligatory tug to write a certain kind of poem?

PS: I refuse to put myself in the position of owing anyone anything—my voice isn't for sale.

History is valuable for its lessons, but if everyone who comes after is "paying dues" to what came before, we're not exactly learning from the present. I don't feel obligated to write from my race or about my race or to my race. There are

too many of those poems littering the landscape, not saying anything except “Here’s my way of saying what’s been said before.” Every poem should be a fist moving forward, breaking through and making a hole big enough for light to stream in. People of color are constantly struggling with past restrictions—why should poets of color take that backwards step and impose that type of restriction on their own work?

The duty of any poet is: never sleep an untroubled sleep.

NS: What makes for a great poem?

PS: Look for an unexpected entry point into the poem. Visualize millions of other people sitting down to write the same poem. Make yours different.

Close off parts of the poem, leaving it in the dark. Open up other parts, letting in streams of light.

Experiment with perspective. Try on all the shoes in the narrative. When those shoes feel way too small, begin to write.

Make the language your bitch. Do untold things with it. Turn adjectives into nouns, use soft slippery words for hard stationary things. Say “Damn!” and “What?” a lot as you’re reading your work. Read every word out loud as you write it. Be constantly astonished.

The poem is complete when it stops breathing—It won’t stop breathing until you do.

NS: Rule #2 of Lawrence Jay Dessner’s 1979 book, “How to Write a Poem,” is “Never treat your reader without respect.” The “what not to dos” include: do not lie; do not force your

reader to guess what's going on; do not speak to your reader as if you were Moses; do not tell your reader how to behave; and, do not show off. Do you agree?

PS: A poet should not lie—unless he/she is crafting a world that will change the reader's life. After all, poets are creative writers.

Amen. Poets should not force their readers to guess what is going on. Life is enough of a guessing game. Riddles are a different genre.

Poets aren't prophets. We're as confounded as the next guy, crawling around down here in the muck clawing for clarity and consolation. We don't have any knowledge from On High to impart to the masses. Your reader needs to know that you're fallible, that you frequently misstep, and that you're sometimes a fool.

Poets shouldn't tell readers how to behave; instead, present them with ways to misbehave. It'll be much more fun, and they'll be more likely to buy your next book.

How exactly does a poet show off? Embedding a French wine list in a sestina written entirely in Pig Latin? Name dropping? Buying drinks for the house?

There's a weird little poetry hierarchy which gives some poets the idea that they're "better" at something than other poets, and that idea deserves its own little expletive. Language is huge and sloppy and glittery and life-changing, and it belongs to all of us. We may be at different stages, but we're all storytellers searching for a story. Is a poet laureate's story better than the ex-con who finally gets up enough nerve to sign up for the open mic? Hell, no. Never.

NS: What would you add to Dessner's list?

PS: Visualize a hook going into your reader's skin, steal your reader's breath and refuse to give it back, don't ever give your reader the words they're asking for, and don't ever apologize.

NS: Miller Williams argues, "A poem comes into existence when the imagination of a writer and the imagination of a reader confront each other inside the act of language."

PS: When readers encounter my work, they either have to stretch the boundaries of their imagination to take in the whole of my story, or stifle their imagination, which means I have failed in some way. I want to be constantly at work on the reader, tweaking his viewpoint, ripping his world view wide open, turning something familiar upside down so he can glimpse its underbelly. There is seldom a perfect, un-ragged meeting of the minds. I have to convince the reader that the world I've created is the right one, and the only tool (the only weapon) is language. We're on a battleground—and there is no such thing as a draw. Either we both win—the poem succeeds, and the reader walks away changed in some way—or we both fail.

NS: In *Blood Dazzler*, is Hurricane Katrina the familiar that has been turned on its belly?

PS: No, the hurricane can't be what is familiar, because it's so far outside the realm of so many people's experiences. Most of us will never be anywhere near a hurricane. I want my readers to look at this supposed "act of God" and realize that these atmospheric dramas are actually opportunities for God to work on us—to test our strength, unveil our vulnerabilities, reveal us as small and ineffectual or huge and unflinching. Katrina was an undeniably human story,

and I'm amazed at how many ways we lost sight of that. The underbelly of this tragedy is trembling and bright red, with blood pulsing frightfully close to the surface. There's a heart just underneath that surface.

NS: In terms of research and mental wear and tear, how did you prepare for *Blood Dazzler*?

PS: Absolutely nothing that most people didn't do. I watched television. I read stories. I absorbed the drama the way thousands of other people did, and that's exactly the viewpoint I wanted to write from. I wanted to see if I could reach into a story that was not "mine" and make it mine across miles, across cultures, across any variances of region and ritual. From the beginning, the story of Katrina was the story of any black person and a million black people. It was a story of manipulation and deceit and abandonment and the threat of their entrance into each of our lives.

There was one viewpoint I was not entitled to, and that is the viewpoint of someone in the center of the storm, someone who watched a home and life wash away, someone who saw a whole way of living die in a blink of Katrina's eye. There are hundreds of New Orleans writers and artists who possess that story in a way I could not—no matter how much research I did. So, instead of approaching their perspective with an eye toward co-opting the experience, I stayed where I sat and dealt with what I saw in exactly the way I saw it. I wanted to be one of the WTF people, who watched and wanted, with all of their hearts, not to believe; but, knowing all the time that what we were seeing was true, that it had always been true.

NS: *Blood Dazzler* evokes the unimaginable horror of Katrina and the fallout of her landfall using personae as its

main literary tool. Why is personae your device of choice?

PS: Persona is magical. It forced me to push myself out of the way, which I felt was essential in this story. Katrina was all muscle, spittle, and roar. She changed the way the sky did business. She didn't need me to relate her tale. There was also the idea of letting the storm speak for herself, of letting her be selfish or remorseful or an unbridled bitch. From there, the stories of everyone else just had to stand beside her and try to find their own strength.

NS: Considering the infamy and enormity of the subject, how and when did you decide that *Blood Dazzler* was complete? And, how did you avoid the urge to add to poems and/or insert additional pieces?

PS: I didn't avoid the urge to add to poems and there are additional pieces. I learned long ago that just because poems are crammed between the covers of a book doesn't mean that they stop breathing. I'd be a fool to think that everything that can be said about Katrina has been said, by me, case closed. Those poems don't stop pushing, so I don't take that final period at the end of that final line in that final stanza too seriously. They are done for the purposes of the book. But they are simply snapshots in a living, breathing narrative. My poems need to know that they can tell me anything, at any time, and that what they tell me can blow what I previously thought wide open.

In short, some of the poems in *Blood Dazzler* are longer and different elsewhere. And there are poems that weren't finished in time, but they're still being written. I don't intend to let the storm die completely.

NS: What is currently cluttering your path? What, as you

would say, are you now “tripping over?”

PS: I’m tripping over a young adult novel, a children’s picture book, a verse memoir, an unfinished biography and a dance/theater collaboration of *Blood Dazzler*.

Contributor Biographies

Patricia Barnett resides in Southfield, MI with her family, Ryan, Keisha, and Justin. She is currently a Healthcare professional and holds an MBA. Patricia has been interested in historical and science fiction from childhood. Her lifelong dream has been to become an author of novels and screenplays and continues to write as a favorite pastime.

Reginald Dwayne Betts writes poems and runs a book club, YoungMenRead, for children in the DC Metro Area. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Gulf Coast*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Obsidian III*, *Poet Lore* and *Hanging Loose* and he's currently at work on a memoir, *A Question of Freedom*.

Tara Betts is the author of *Arc and Hue*. Tara appears in *Callaloo*, *Obsidian III*, *Bum Rush the Page*, *Gathering Ground* and both *Spoken Word Revolution* anthologies. She currently teaches creative writing at Rutgers University.

R.C. Brown received Honorable Mention in the PEN Prison Writing Contest for his poem, "A Way of Saying." He reads poetry constantly. Pablo Neruda, Walt Whitman, and Amiri Baraka are among his favorites. Brown continues to write and attend poetry class every Tuesday under the esteemed tutelage of Cara Benson and The First Poets of Mt. McGregor Correctional Facility.

Seán M. "Casito" Dalpiaz's work has appeared in *BoogCity* (Issue 48), *Quay*, and *The Acentos Review*. Thanks to the un-poet NYSDOCS and all the poets (declared and undeclared) of his life.

Mitchell L. H. Douglas is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Indiana University-Purdue University

Indianapolis (IUPUI). His poetry appears in *Callaloo*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and the anthologies *The Ringing Ear: Black Poets Lean South* (University of Georgia Press), and *Zoland Poetry Volume II* (Zoland Books). A Cave Canem fellow and cofounder of the Affrilachian Poets, his debut collection, *Cooling Board: A Long-Playing Poem*, is available from Red Hen Press.

Richard Hamilton lives in Alabama. A Cave Canem Fellow, his work has appeared in numerous print and online journals including “A” Magazine, *MATTER Journal*, *Cross-Cultural Poetics*, and *The Drunken Boat (AZ)*. He teaches creative writing at Tuskegee University.

Melanie Henderson, a fourth generation native of Washington, DC, is a graduate of Howard University and a MFA candidate at Lesley University in Cambridge, MA. A visual and literary artist and an alum of Voices Summer Writing Workshops (VONA), her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in such publications as *Black Arts Quarterly*, *Drumvoices Revue*, *Fingernails across the Chalkboard: Poetry and Prose on HIV/AIDS from the Black Diaspora*, *Jubilat*, *Tuesday; An Art Project*, and *Warpland Journal*. She is a winner of the Larry Neal Writers’ Award, 2009 Adult Poetry.

Angela Jackson is an award winning poet, playwright, and novelist. She is the recipient of the Shelly Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America. Her collection, *Dark Legs and Silk Kisses*, was awarded the Chicago Sun Times/Friends of Literature Book of the Year Award and the Carl Sandburg Award. *And All These Roads Be Luminous* was nominated for the National Book Award. Her forthcoming novel, *Where I Must Go* (Northwestern University Press) has

been awarded an American Book Award. Jackson is at work on a collection of poems, *An Island in Time*.

Amanda Johnston, Cave Canem Fellow and Affrilachian Poet, has performed across the country for various causes and events. Honors include a 2003 and 2004 Artists Enrichment grant from the Kentucky Foundation for Women and the 2005 Austin International Poetry Festival's Christina Sergeyevna Award. She is an ensemble member of The Austin Project Performance Company (TAPPCo) and is the founding editor of *TORCH: poetry, prose, and short stories by African American Women*.

Cole Lavalais received her MFA in Creative Writing from Chicago State University. Her work has appeared in *Warpland* and the anthology *Just Like A Girl: A Manifesta*. She is currently pursuing her PhD in English at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where she also teaches creative writing and literature.

Adrian Matejka is the author of *The Devil's Garden* (Alice James Books). His second book, *Mixology*, was selected as a winner of the 2008 National Poetry Series and is forthcoming in May, 2009. "Roadwork at Seal Rock" is from his manuscript-in-progress, *The Big Smoke: Jack Johnson Tells It*. He teaches at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

David Mills is a Cave Canem alum. He is published in *Obsidian III*, *Rattapallax*, *Margie*, Hanging Loose Press. He has won a PALF poetry award, the Hughes Diop award at Chicago State University and a Brio award.

John Murillo is a two-time Larry Neal Writers' Award winner and the 2008-2009 Elma P. Stuckey Visiting Emerging Poet-in-Residence at Columbia College Chicago. A graduate of

New York University's MFA program in creative writing, he has received fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, the Atlantic Center for the Arts, Cave Canem, and the New York Times. His poetry has appeared in such publications as *Ploughshares*, *Ninth Letter*, *Lumina*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, and the anthology, *DC Poets Against the War*. In 2008, his work was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Susan Nixon teaches *Philanthropy, Public Policy and Community Change*, and serves as co-director of the *Case Studies in Philanthropy Project* at Loyola University Chicago's Philanthropy and Nonprofit Sector Program. Ms. Motley holds a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology from Roosevelt University (1969) and was named a Loeb Fellow "90" at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. She attended the Voices of Our Nations writing conference in 2004 and was a resident artist at the Ragdale Foundation, fall 2005. Ms. Motley is a Graduate Student-At-Large, Gwendolyn Brooks Center for Black Literature and Creative Writing at Chicago State University.

Tacuma Roeback holds an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Chicago State University. Roeback is a critic for hip-hop website, okayplayer.com. His articles have appeared in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, the Phoenix New Times and the Tennessean (Nashville, TN). His short fiction has appeared in *Warpland: A Journal of Black Literature and Ideas and Girl Speak*. His essay entitled, "Masking," will appear in SAGE publication's Encyclopedia of Identity in 2010. He is an adjunct instructor in English at DePaul University.

Nicole Sealey is a writer, editor, and Cave Canem fellow. Her interviews with writers Nikki Giovanni and Sapphire can be found in *Mosaic* literary magazine and *Artists and Influence: Volume XXV*, respectively. She was recently selected to participate in the 13th Annual Minority Writers Seminar in Nashville, Tennessee. She is the Readings/Workshops and Writers Exchange Program Coordinator at Poets & Writers, Inc. She lives in New York City.

L. Lamar Wilson, a Cave Canem fellow, MFA candidate at Virginia Tech and freelance journalist/editor, has work in *Rattle*, *The Washington Post*, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* and other publications.

Gail Upchurch is a current Clark Fellow at the State University of New York at Binghamton where she's working on a doctoral degree in literature and creative writing/fiction and also completing a novel entitled *Six Months Come and Gone*.

Demetrice Anntia Worley's poetry appears in anthologies such as *Women. Period.* (Spinster Ink, 2008) and *Courage, Risk, and Women* (U of North Texas P, 2007) and has appeared in literary journals such as *Permafrost*, *Clackamas*, and *Spoon River Poetry Review*. She is a Cave Canem Fellow. Currently, she is an associate professor of English at Bradley University where teaches creative writing and African American literature. In her spare time, she visualizes world peace.

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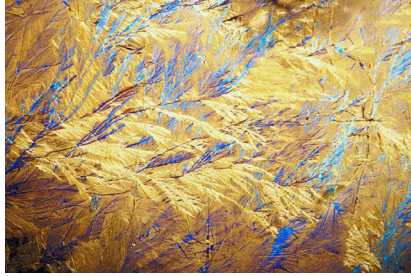
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