DARK PHRASES

1993

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So Beautiful

Malkia Cyril

There are silences which inform my pain.

It is in sliced and chopped quiet that I have always known
my body
I have not been forever this fat, this uncharacteristically unhappy
with the slow path of water down my abdomen,
slick between my thighs
the baby pictures slide memories sweet
down the back of my throat
of mommies cuddling and crowding around
screaming Black children
become Black women in the dark hallways of project buildings
the back rooms of substandard housing
in the streets of Brooklyn
we were shot into female corners
and were there when Presidents decided which to keep and cut
I have never been worth saving
so we were Black women
with our heads disconnected from our spirits
we were Black and women
on the blood soaked hands of
Korean grocers whose minds saw white projected images
of ho's and crackhed's
before rainbow of death made in our collective eye
bursting red our veins poppin blue blood
our bones crushed and crashing onto the
linoleum floors of hard working women
for a dollar we became dead niggas
or the dead girlfriends of black women
angry and afraid
believing in some shit that is meant to destroy us
and out of 1960's Black we became women
oilin' our scalps,
scratchin out the dandruff of our ancestors
our lives dirty as fingernails with no hope
and true womanhood slicin' and dicin' like a blender gadget

meant to whip us into somethin' cute and tasty

my name drips off the tongue of this nation like murder

and they wonder
these white girls in white colleges sitting in white classrooms
with white teachers
enlightened hair whippin careless and
undaunted by the skidmarks on our faces
bundles of pain learning about the ways their mothers avoided their
fathers luxuries inside someone's black mother
and they
white neverminds in a culture of nevermind its none of your
business anyway give away and give away and think that they've
found liberation in schools reminiscent of the Mickey Mouse Club by
pointing to that other white girl who mistakenly uttered what they
were all thinking anyway

"stupid niggers this is my school"

calling **her** a shame
while they choke buried in coffins of patriarchy
and everytime I turn around some mother is being killed
by her sons and some twisted reality of being too dark and too big
and just not right is passed in a needle to some sista
and rests deep in her arms
Oh...the tracks of my tears, the full of my breasts
the thick of my hair couldn't fit into Vogue and I will always be
too much and un-Madamoiselle like
but I wanted so bad when I lived on the fringes of illusion
to be there
not in the pages of Vogue, but in somebody's pages
on somebody's mind I was a Black and lonely woman
who could've killed for a waist introverted into
negative numbers
sometimes I die to be minus
minus 10, or even funny and interesting like prime time
hold people's attention like L.A. Law or Roseanne
be a series to come back to like those girls
who give a little pussy to boys in the big house to move
from the kitchen to the prarie
from the back room to the frontier
or think I wouldn't mind security

being safe in the hyphenated or nameless existence of marriage
wouldn't care if my pussy was on a payment plan
if someone would just talk to me and tell me I was
somethin more than an after-school special
and there are so many times
when I just wanna follow the rules
be in the game
but there is a dry spot in my crying heart
that won't let me play with police who
shoot the women first
and brothers who quietly caress the night
soft brown horizons gleam honey-colored on their necks
all silk in their voices and cream in their smiles
awkward at ten and interegated then
into a "Bitches ain't shit but hoes and chicks" mentality
do not hold my interest when instead of a baby
they cradle a gun
we will never be the canon that spits a
capitalist deconstruction of the human agenda
but we lick the salty tears from the hole it leaves
in all of our lives when we are forced to
look truth in its face and believe.

I don't understand why I still try to fit the wide of my soul
the scent of the sista I follow
I lead and walk beside
the world of my word
the ocean in my name
into bottles of lighter fluid
or cut out sugar coated cookies that some asshole
will smash to pieces anyway
but even on this edge
the innuendoes and implications
are not lynched they do not condense into nothingness
I feel them in this space and know them on my terms
and create myself in the silences I have left behind.

I am ugly when I'm ugly and when I am
beautiful...?
There is no summer longer than mine

William M. Kelley

Raising Women: A Man's Journey into Womanhood

William M. Kelley

I wanted children even before I quite realized that women actually played a part in making them. At first I think I just wanted a brother or sister. But as I grew older, and having finally caught on that no little companion would materialize out of my mother's body, I began to look forward to the day when I could have some children of my own. By now I knew how people made babies, and that seemed O.K. too.

I suppose that I first realized that babies came out of women because of my mother. A modest woman, I hardly ever glimpsed her totally naked, by accident several times, but til I reached the age of seven I saw her often in her underwear. Both my mother and my grandmother, once they got on their bras and drawers, they let me watch the rest.

I came out of this experience with two realizations, even as young as seven. First, compared to men, women wore some of the least functional and most uncomfortable clothes any mind could devise. From time to time, they let me stumble around in their high heels, ankles wobbling. In the winter, my mother wore woolies but continued to wear skirts, complaining of the cold Bronx wind on her legs. In the summer, at least till she reached the age of seventy, my beloved Nana daily laced herself into a corset, covered it with a slip, then a dress. Some sinister tyranny clearly orchestrated this.

Secondly, but more importantly, seeing my mother in bra and halfslip revealed to met the top of the world's ugliest Caesarian scar, a brown zigzaggy tear that looked like she'd given birth to me in an open boat off a shipwrecked oceanliner, my inbringing performed by my father, an amateur upholsterer. Actually she'd had me in New York City, her incision stitched by an incompetent intern using contaminated medical twine.

I would ponder that scar and know that my mother had exhibited bravery and fortitude and love at least as monumental as any man at that time who fought Nipponese or Nazis in foreign lands. My mother had clearly visited Hell and returned with me in her arms, though she always called me God's perfect child, I daresay more as incentive than description. Later on, reading Macbeth, when McDuff says that he came "from my mother's womb untimely ripp'd", I could relate visually.

I held women in high esteem from early in my life. My Nana sewed, crocheted and knit. I would sit with her, threading needles for her, learning how to sew and listening as she recounted the story of my forebears: the Haitian slavegirl aged fourteen, the Confederate colonel who knocked her up, gave the

baby to his spinster sisters to raise as a servant, then sold the Haitian mother in the market at New Orleans; the lightskinned baby growing up to watch at fifteen Sherman's troops marching through Georgia bringing Emancipation, becoming the mistress of Savannah's foremost gunsmith, a German from the Alsace, how she bore him ten children, how he left his wife and came to live with her, how one of the children grew up to become my beloved Nana, who came North and married a Puerto Rican from Ponce; and more. Nana couldn't cook, so Mama handled that. (Pop taught me to keep house.) They said they taught me to do most everything a woman did for a man so I wouldn't later on come to depend on the wrong kind of woman. They never defined that kind of woman, too Catholic to do it, but at least I wouldn't get hooked by one because I couldn't make a bed or keep my clothes clean and mended or fry an omelette.

Now I tell you all this so you'll know what kind of women nurtured me and their great importance in my life, and so that you'll not disbelieve me when I state that in looking for a wife I looked not so much for someone who would love and care for me, but for a woman who would love and care for my projected children. Except it didn't work out quite that way. The mother of my children picked me before I had a chance to pick her. When I took her to meet my Nana (then aged eighty-six, clearminded, her eyes failing, but still sewing), they ignored me and chatted amiably and intimately for three hours. At comparable ages, they even resembled each other. In six months, I found myself married.

The doctor who administered us our blood tests gave us some good advice: Wait for a year to have children to see if the marriage will work out. We waited for three years. When we had our first child, we really wanted her. It makes a big difference. We Africamericans bring too many unwanted children into the world. And it shows in the way too many of us keep or don't keep them. We all naturally work harder for something we really want than for something that comes to us by accident. One could say the same thing about acquiring freedom.

The Sunday after the Thursday my first daughter came into the world, twenty-one slugs took Brother Malcolm out of it in front of his wife and daughters. A year later, I daily attended the trial of his three accused killers, finally coming to the firm conviction that the State hadn't proved its case against two of the three. After the guilty verdict came in, I resolved to leave the Plantation, perhaps forever. I couldn't do any better for my baby daughter than to remove her from a mediocre, racist and violent environment. We could protest and battle our lives through, but before we would ever eradicate mediocrity, racism and violence, their poison would already have infected our daughter.

Deciding to escape the Plantation constituted the first major decision I made with my new daughter's welfare in mind. I had other reasons too. One time somebody came to visit us, a lightskinned Africamerican woman, and during the course of her introduction to my first born, innocently exclaimed, "And she's got such nice soft good pretty hair!"

Sometimes words sting, and these stung. I never said anything about it to the woman herself; I smiled and took the compliment. But inside I remembered almost the first thing I'd ever personally heard Brother Malcolm say: "Who taught you to hate your hair, and your lips and your noses, and your brown beautiful skin?"

As someone who spent long teenage hours in the bathroom trying, with beeswax and steam, to get my hair to do things contrary to its nature, Brother Malcolm had opened me up with that single question. Now, here all that bulltwinkie came seeping into my house. Would my daughter spend her childhood quantified and classified by the quality of her hair? What good to battle racism in the street if it came into your home on the lips of friends?

So we went to Paris on the way to Africa. In Paris we'd meet people from Senegal, the place which most interested me, and find out what we'd need to know. While we learned French and met Africans, my wife had another baby, planned and much wanted. The first baby needed company, someone who looked more like her in a sea of flaxenhaired blue-eyed Frenchettes.

My second daughter I saw born. My wife opened her legs and out came a blackhaired purple bawling creation, a girl. Seeing my daughter birthed doubled my respect and admiration for my wife, for all women. I thought about my Nana Jessie going through all this mainest of events four times and my other grandmother doing it ten times. Now I had two such glorious and lifefilled beings to raise, my two precious Pearls, a profound responsibility.

In the meantime, the more we learned about Africa and Africans, the more we realized that we had much work to do to get ready for Africa. Senegal would take physical strength and we had lived in cities too long. At thirty-two years of age, and smoking a pack of Camels a day, I would get out of breath climbing five flights of stairs. And Africa didn't realistically seem like a good place to take two small children. Nor did we have the spiritual strength required for the journey. One had really to believe, and we didn't. It just seemed so far away.

But one thing had become clear; we had to leave Paris. First of all, it rained two hundred days a year. We couldn't get the Pearls out to play. Cooped up in an apartment for days at a time, the older Pearl (now three) couldn't sleep at night, had developed respiratory problems. And judging from her first few months, the new baby would have more energy than her older sister, more need for regular outdoor exercise.

Still I didn't want to return them to the Plantation. By this time, they'd killed Rev. King too. Things would not get better for a long while, if ever. At the same time, I hear more and more good things about Jamaica, in the West Indies; Xaymaca, the native Arawakans called it, Land of Wood and Water.

As a place to raise two girls, Jamaica had a lot to recommend it. Besides sun and sea and sand, the people spoke several interesting varieties of English, ranging from Received Pronunciation to African-laced patois. The cooking traditions of Africa, which in the United States had begun to wither before the

fiery onslaught of Colonel Mickey Donald Feed, still boiled and bubbled among Jamaican women. To this day, my daughters (now sophisticated New York women) can feed ten with a handful of red beans, a pound of rice, some onions, and one half chicken. Add Dragon Stout and party. In Jamaica in 1968, people still cooked and ate real food.

We knew little of this when we got there. We just knew about the sun and sea. We knew that the money we paid for an apartment in Paris now bought us a house with a yard.

I entered what I called my shepherding period. I'd spend hours sitting on the verandah (nothing fancy, just a covered porch) and watch the Pearls at play. From afar, I explored every exotic nannybug or poinsettia leaf that they explored. I watched them because I wanted to find out about them. I began to realize that I had finally begun to understand women.

Drawing on my early insight about the tyranny of women's clothes, as much as possible we dressed the two Pearls like boys. Their understuff usually had frills, but outside they wore T-shirts, shorts or jeans, which made easier climbing the hogplum tree in the front yard. Here we bucked the prevailing Jamaican wind, which turned out little girls in thighhigh dresses with their pantyseats showing, stirring the passions of undisciplined men. Jamaicans pegged the age of consent at fourteen.

When we went to the beach, we put them in bottoms. Why make them hide something they didn't have yet? And everybody has nipples. Occasionally someone would notice and look real hard. But mostly nobody cared. When the Pearls began to want to wear tops, years before they had to, we let them. But at least they'd had a few years of sun on their bare chests.

At the urging of my very middleclass landlady, we started the older Pearl in nursery school. But it didn't work out; not enough exercise, too much pretension. After a year and a half, we took her out. She and her sister played around in the yard for another year. Then we noticed them starting to play school, the older Pearl as teacher and the younger one as pupil. Obviously they wanted some learning, but we couldn't bring ourselves to send them back. Day by day we'd watched their sisterly bond growing stronger. Even if we sent them to the same school, they'd hardly see each other. They'd develop friendships in their age groups which would slowly wear away their link.

We decided to set up our own school, a little oneroom schoolhouse for two. The Pearls named it the Country Garden School.

In Jamaica, children wore uniforms to school, a good idea. It cut down on clothes competition among students and saved money for the parents. In a strange way, uniforms legitimized childhood, gave school a visual place in society. The Pearls didn't mind very much not going to school, but they insisted on uniforms. Every school child must have school uniform, Papa, you no see that. So uniforms they got.

Each morning at seven, they'd wake up, wash and put on their uniforms,

feed the cats and eat a light breakfast of fruit, bun and cheese, cocoa, brush their teeth, then leave the house for Country Garden School. From the window, we'd watch, as hand in hand and carrying bookladen bags, the Pearls strolled to our gate, and later on a safer street to the corner, still in sight of our window, and there linger, chatting, as if waiting for a bus. After a few moments, they'd start back toward home, enter the gate, walk round the house and knock on my office door, which I set up like a schoolroom.

Somehow this ritual of departure and arrival had survived from their earliest playing-school game. But more than just a ritual, it helped us to make a shift in our relationship. I took teaching to them very seriously, marshalling everything I'd learned about teaching and learning since 1950 and my first camp counselor job. And to them, in the interval, I became Mr. Windfield, the name they'd given their teacher, not a man to trifle with like softhearted Papa who eventually gave you whatever you needed and most of what you wanted.

Mr. Windfield (he had no first name) taught Grammar & Phonetics, Caribbean History, Spanish, Music (recorders), European & American History & Lit (affectionately nicknamed "Pinkfolks"). We saw no truth in white&black, preferred pink&brown. Mr. Windfield also tried to handle Math, and conducted Sports and Nature Walk, which might include sauntering up to the beach collecting shells, to Biscayne Avenue for a snocone. Mama, who always remained Mama, taught French, Arts & Crafts, Needlecraft, and Social Investigation, which meant making a shopping list, estimating the cost of each item, and adding the total. Then in the open market, as Mama dealt with the marketladies, the Pearls would check their estimates against reality. We had school twenty hours a week, in the morning before the day got too hot.

They did well. Later, after having returned to the Plantation, when they each entered public school in seventh grade, they tested high and did well, both graduating high school, though the younger Pearl never did much like school until she found one that would teach her how to set a fingerwave and wield a blowdryer. The older Pearl has broad experience in computers.

Perhaps I got more out of teaching the Pearls than they did, though I hope their schooling did not suffer because of mine. I had a chance to see them in a new way, dealing with their minds instead of their hearts. Some will not understand why this matters, might even consider it detrimental to the child to have a parent as teacher, something like husband teaching a wife to drive a car. I can only answer that those we hire to teach our Africamerican children have not done such a good job of it that we should refrain from giving them all the help we can. And how to explain that each September we take bright little minds to kindergarten only to have them come back to us several years later poorly educated, hostile and diagnosed as demented or defective? As the Native American poet, Spotted Pony, once said, "If the schools were any good, society would improve!"

But I did not intend for this to turn into an indictment of the public schools, but rather wanted to encourage Africamericans to start dealing with our

children's minds, and to illustrate some of the rewards for doing so. I wanted to encourage especially the Africamerican man to take an active interest in the development of his children, especially his daughters. I've never had a son, so maybe I don't know, but I can't imagine a son giving me more than have my daughters.

They reintroduced me to the fine art of walking slow. I got so good at it that I could do an entire city block in a full thirty minutes. And believe me, I didn't miss a thing, not one dog or flower. They taught me curiosity. I've peeped through many a fence hole and round many a corner that I'd have missed if not for them. I saw several circuses and a carnival that would've passed me without notice. They impelled me to stop smoking cigarettes. The great miracle of them turned me toward the Creator.

But I'd better stop. In a moment, I'll dig out two or three more photograph albums, and really start bragging. I do have to say however that most of all, my daughters have given me the gift of the good women they have become. Any time I get to spend with them now brings me great pleasure. They haven't had an easy life with a creative artist as a papa, so they've grown up tough, but they haven't turned hard or cynical. They have generous spirits. I figure myself as 40% responsible for what they've become, and I'd like to think that wherever my ancestors dwell, my Mama and Nana, greatgreatgrandma Josephine, and before her, the Haitian teenage Ouidette Badu; and grandma Sina, and greatgrandma Alberta and all the female ancestors I didn't name or whose names I don't know, that all those glorious and life-filled beings can see the women I played a part in raising, can rock their rockers, nod their heads, and affirm:

Now them's two nice young ladies.

Dropping Me Off

Chris Lee

Pulled over for stopping and no one has moved.
There is a lurking percussion
from the radio and we're at the curb
before my house in the lowered white car.
White, I'm not, but I get out hands up to say:
"We're all neighbors, Officers
and I live around here,"
when I see a K-9 out the door of the black and white run at me
in the red and blue flash of rollers.
I'm a young quick guy and hop back in.
At the window are roaring fangs,
extended claws before the glass at my face.
No wrong had been done
but once I've been frisked and license checked
a cop warns me of my gun carrying potential.
Years now, I've been a model minority
but beast be damned.
The night is full of dark pigment.

Kaneem L. Smith

Bloodlines

leslie Peace jubilee

Trusting shadows and echoes
screaming thinly into the throat of dreams

My mother's voice had begun
to flutter as her mother's voice
Starling caught woman stories

A repetition of wings sharpen
themselves like tongues

Every time I walk inside myself, she says
her head bowed as if in prayer
Every time I walk inside myself
I crash into a gray wall
impenetrable and I destroy
myself against it

A repetition of wings sharpen themselves

Where are your songs of glory? she asks me

What is tacit in touch, tears, echoes
unrequited wishes for salvation
Mother and daughter back to naked back
Hands stretched toward the Father
Oh, heavenly Father, cleanse
these veins you've lain
and lined with rape and blood
and no good grace of god

Where are my songs of glory?

As though I could answer
when goddesses close their eyes
and girls grope for their voices

A repetition of wings stun
themselves like dumb tongues

I Shall Sell My Poverty

Okot Benge

One day
I shall sell this suffocating poverty
That now hang over me
Like a stinking dirty rag

Like mother hen
Gathering its chicks under her wings
I shall gather together
My sorrows and heartaches
My hunger and social nothingness
My loneliness and hopelessness
Into a tearful volume of writings

I shall write
Of a poverty-caged life
Drowning in a lake of destitution
With no social or economic boats to row ashore
Ever choked with muddy water
of poverty-strangled love affair.

With my pen I shall decorate my poverty
And weave it into a neat book
That shall fetch me cash on the market

Then, my poverty shall be no more
For I shall be a rich poor man.

For Louis When The Day Is Long

Bernardo Ruiz

Help me Louis. If I don't get all the facts straight, forgive me. I don't remember everything as clearly as it happened, but I remember the important parts.

It was a late night at the Korean Fruit and Vegetable. You and I had eaten fried fish sandwiches for dinner but we were hungry again and restless. Out in front a brown man was chopping chives. The sweet raw vegetable smell made my mouth water. I stood for a moment looking at his deft heavy hands. I asked him where he was from. Puebla, he said. There were many Mexicans from Puebla in the city that summer, cutting carrots and selling fruit in front of Korean grocers. He told me Isounded like a Mexican, where was I from ? Guanajuato, I told him. He smiled, he looked as out of place as the flowers he had cut and wrapped in wax paper.

Inside, the man behind the counter was giving you looks, Louis. I watched you pick out a soda on the television monitor. Your skin was flat black. Themonitor was cheap and one couldn't make out your features, only black. Pretty soon the Korean man started yelling in Korean to another man in the back. In seconds a young Korean kid, about our age, wearing a Raiders cap, came from theback and leaned against a shelf with his arms folded. The owner was trying to get the man out front to watch me but he couldn't speak enough English to tell himwhat he wanted. If he had been able to, I doubt the man from Puebla would haveunderstood. They were looking at each other in a strained, tower-of-babel way. I finally told the man from Puebla in Spanish to watch me. The owner's facecrimsoned and he didn't look at me again. You bought a soda, not without some words, and we left, cursing.

We were loose in Alphabet city. The sky had a glow behind its darkness. The streets were loud and chaotic with people. We were silent for awhile, moving through the swarms. I was dizzy with faces. Conversation was indistinguishable and the collective hum was unreal. There was a raunchy body smell underneath the electric lamps. Drunken boyfriends stumbled with heavy arms around their girls. The homeless had lined the streets with broken shoes and magazines. There was the warm food smell hitting the street from outdoor restaurants. I stared at the crowded tables. Candles flickered and hands gesticulated over half-finished meals. I was hungry and without realizing it I had stopped and was staring at this one table. The couple looked up from their dinner. My mouth was open, I felt like afool. You had gone up the block a little but came back and took my arm.

-What the fuck do you think you are lookin' at ?, you yelled at them.
They turned back to their dinners, shaking their heads and we ran up the block. You were itching for trouble. Come to think of it , so was I. Anything to break the slow monotonous night. We walked over, past 1st Ave. where the streets were less crowded. Where the houses looked like they had been bombed. We walked almost to the edge of the highway. When we got to a dark corner you scrambled onto a rubble pile. I followed, scraping my knee and cursing. You were looking around for something. I asked you what you thought you were doing. You said nothing but picked up a bottle and filled it with gravel.
-Get something, you said.
I grabbed a brick. As we were sliding down the rubble pile you asked if I remembered your aunt Aida.
-Yeah, I said, the one who used to live right up the block.
That's the one. You told me that one night a couple of months ago, the landlord of the building had gone to her in the night and said the kids were making too much noise. Aida said she'd keep it down. That wasn't enough, she had been late with her last three rent payments, he wanted her out within the week. He said that then walked downstairs. Before Aida had her and her kids stuff out, the Landlord's brother was putting boxes in the living room. He and his wife and his fat kids were all settled in by the next night.

We went up the block a little. I held the brick behind my back. We crossedthe street and crouched near some bushes. A delivery boy was bringing some pizza inside. A heavy, round man opened the outside door and paid the delivery boy.
We waited as he went upstairs. He walked into Aida's old apartment, and his kids sat down for dinner. Without a word, as the delivery boy biked up the street and a car approached, we ran up as close as we could and let the bottle and brick set sail. There was a tremendous crash. We stood still, looking at each other, then we made for 1st Ave. like our lives depended on it. For whatever reason we heard gunshots behind us. We ran straight for three blocks.

We ducked into an alley and put our hands on our knees, panting. We were laughing, trying to catch our breath. At the other end of the alley I heard something rustle.
-Motherfucker !
A tall skinny man with a straw fishing hat and a torn jacket came out of the darkness and into a yellow shaft of light.
-Say, you cats got a screwdriver on you ?, My flutes all busted up. How about a rubber band ? Nah ? How about some change ? Some motherfucker stepped on my flute case and cracked this part here. I was gonna play out in the street, but it's all fucked up. We fumbled for some change. He was thankful but more interested in his flute. His face was chocolate brown and his cheeks were sucked in. He was missing some teeth. He tried to screw his flute together and pipe out a tune. Wind escaped through a crack on the side.
-Man, it's all fucked up ! Say y'all are some good lookin' cats. You make me feel

old. Damn, lookit you. When I was twenty-seven I looked like you. I had all my teeth. But that was before. I used to go around slapping bartenders, jumping off buildings, fighting with anybody and everybody. Damn, we used to fuck shit up.
He was looking up at the sky.
-Shit, I was one of the first revolutionaries.
We were laughing. You asked him where he was from.
-Where'm I from ?, Where the fuck are you from ?, Where you think I'm from. Right here. Planet Earth, man, where you from ? Nah I'm just playin', I'm from right over there. I'm a sculptor, the fuck I want a job that pays four dollars an hour for, man. Fuck that. Where y'all from ?
I said my family was from Mexico, that I was born there, but that I lived in Brooklyn.
-Mexican ? Damn you tall for a Mexican, you got all these dudes from Puebla, *Pueblitos*, runnin around in the train stations, they're like this tall.
He put his hand down to his waist.
-I was down in Mexico, I was in Jalisco. I used to live in California. I was shooting bags of dope into my arm at 15. I used to stumble around the streets, doped outta my mind with my boy George. Back then, Whitey was like Pow! I had already been in and out of men's correctional. One day I was like, "Yo George, fuck this shit, they ain't nothin here for me." I hitchhiked down to San Diego, to Tijuana, to Guadalajara, on my way to Brazil to get myself a wife.
He started cracking up.
-When I get down there, George, man I'm a git me a wife !
-I couldn't believe it when I got to Mexico. I was loose in these villages and I was broke, drunk - you name it. They had never seen a black man before. They thought I was a saint. They came running out of their houses, into the street. They came out and hugged me. That was the first time I had been hugged. People put money in my hands and let me spend the night in their houses. They washed me and fed me. When I came back to America it was like prison, Whitey was steppin' on my back.
-They got these jungles in the south. Man we used to fuck these 500 lb. jungle women. We got drunk on pulque, sometimes we'd hallucinate. We just kept going, into the trees, into the iguanas, into everything.
- The indians lived in the jungle but the Federales pushed them out. There were these young indians, my age, they went to the city to earn money. Their villages had everything, but they had to go out to earn money when the Federales came. I told them, "Don't go into the city !, It'll kill you ! Don't you understand ?" But they would go in. When I saw them later they were working in factories or on the roads. Their eyes were empty - they were getting pale. This city, he pointed to a building, All cites are bullshit, man !
-What's your name ?, I asked after awhile.
-They call me Tonny, that's what they used to call me back then. You cats are tooyoung. You look so good, damn. You get fucked up quick in this world. They won't let you stay in the jungle forever.

Louis, do you remember that night ? We stood in that alley half the night. When the humidity broke it started to rain, but we didn't care. Tonny was talking and we were listening.

-How long were you down there ?

-Almost ten years. And some time in a prison in Mazatlan.

He wouldn't tell us what he'd gone to prison for, but he remembered the place realwell. He said there were about twenty-five men in this pit. The rain came in through big holes in the ceiling. There were rats everywhere. No one stayed longer than a month in this place. One time they had to eat dog bones.

-It's not like prisons here. The guards hated it. They would sneak us food it was so bad. Everybody shared. If someone had a Coke, you could bet it went around twenty-four times and the last man got a sip. One time this guy from Belize came into the joint with eighty-five pesos. Me and this dude, the tallest Mexican, were tight y'know. We knew each other from outside. One night we drank a whole bottle of pulque without stopping. We just passed it back and forth. As a matter of fact, it was us that got busted together in the first place, he started laughing again.

-Anyway, me and the tallest Mexican, Jorge were waiting up one night. We knew the Belizean had his pesos stashed in his underwear. And we were starving - so was everybody. And when you had anything you shared it. So that night me and Jorge stayed up till everybody was asleep. I got his back and Jorge was one stealthy motherfucker. He stepped over all these sleeping bodies. I don't know how, but he pulled the bills from the Belizean's underwear. The next morning, we bribed some guards and everyone in the joint had a feast. The Belizean was furious, but the guards kept him quiet.

I was numb. The rain was soft, but a cold wind had set in and I found that I was trembling. I had forgotten who I was or what I was doing. Tonny's words kept me going. The stories were so vivid, I didn't want them to end.

-The tallest Mexican, Tonny started coughing, He got sick from a rat bite. He was like a brother, that dude. I gave him my food. I held his head at night, but he had a fever. He died while I was there. I went numb. I didn't eat. The rats ate my food and I didn't have the energy anymore to push them away. My lips were cracked. My eyes were swollen. There were motherfuckin' flies in my hair. There was shit all around me and I didn't care. Then this dude came in. This guy who had crashed a plane full of drugs and money into the jungle. You see, I hadn't eaten anything and I started seeing things the others didn't. That night I had a dream. Me and this dude were riding motorcycles, side by side, down this long, hot, road. His engine died out and we had to stop. Then I saw this plane, clearer than I had ever seen anything. I swear I could see all the pieces of the plane like they were real, but better and clearer. I understood it. It was a twin engine. I watched from above as the engine on the left failed. The propeller stuttered then stalled. The plane dropped a little, then the other engine went out - but this engine was shut off. I watched the plane crash land in the jungle. It was in this spot where I had been fishing with these Indians. I didn't remember all the

different parts of the dream, but I remembered where the plane crashed. In the morning I woke up and I drew this dude a picture in the dirt of the plane. I told him the first engine died but that the second was shut off. I told him where it was and he just looked at me.

-Later he told me he had to turn off the other engine so he wouldn't be detected by the Federales. He was hoping to coast, but he crashed the motherfucker into this place, then fled. He got busted that afternoon. Then this dude, he fed me his soup. He promised to share half the money in the plane if we ever got out. I could only eat enough at night, and I was still weak. Then a telegram came to the prison office. My mother arranged for my release, with some money in my hand, even though most of it was stolen. I had just enough to get this other guy out. Wewent to his house. He put me in the shower. He washed my feet and put rubber sandals on my them. We slept in this bed for almost three days straight. When I woke up, I had my appetite again. Then we drove down the Yucatan, to the fishing village. The Federales had been trailing us, but we lost them. We found the plane. Some of the drugs were gone, but there was a suitcase full of American dollars. He gave me half. We made our way up north, where some prison officials caught up with us and separated us. They escorted me to the border. They told me I couldn't come back. I been in this shithole ever since. I lived in Harlem, east side, you name it. Damn !, you cats make me sad.

He shifted the weight from his left foot to his right foot. He anxiously wrapped his jacket around his neck and looked up at the sky. In the cold he was shivering. His body was jittery. I watched him try to control the shaking in his left hand.

-I, I'm gonna go shoot a bag of dope into my arm, you cats want to watch ?

We shook our heads. Tonny slapped our hands, then took off across the street to a shitty building that was run down. There was one light in a window with red cloth over it. Tonny stepped out of the light from the street. Tonny, an angel. Louis, were you as cold as I was ? We didn't say anything. We were empty. We walked through the deserted streets back to your apartment. We took some bread from the refrigerator and ate it greedily. I felt heavy and tired. There was only the one bed. We undressed and got under the covers. When we turned out the light, I couldn't sleep. I was exhausted but my eyes were wide open.

-Louis, what do you think ?

-We don't belong here. Tonny was right. Cities are bullshit, we're not supposed to be like this, degraded, in prison, working for other people's gain. We're dying like this. We're crowded like rats, we're all going to kill each other.

We were pretty much silent for the rest of the night. I held the covers tightly around my neck. I thought I was getting a sore throat and my eyes stung. Near dawn, when the sky was bright I finally fell asleep. I got up later and took the train home. I knew there was no food in the house. I was walking to the super-market when I saw a Muslim kneeling to pray. He had set up his mat, he was facing east and praying, right there in front of Key Food. The light was fading across theHudson and people were passing him by on there way home with

shopping bags and briefcases. It was ridiculous. He was somewhere else, he prayed while drunks spat, horns honked, and lights changed. Louis, I never told you that. I stood there for awhile watching him. It's been a long time since I've seen you, since we've spoken the same language or shared a soda. It feels like years since we broke the landlords window or smoked joints in your stairwell. I don't know when we'll see each other again, but I just wanted to say that I haven't forgotten.

Mama Zenzile
for Miriam Makeba

Daphne Ósayádé Dumas

She does not know if the church stands, or
if the theatre is still segregated—Blacks
in the balcony and Whites
gathered in front down below. Mama Zenzile
recreates the landmarks in her memory as she
bends and touches the ground.
She has not attended a funeral, nor witnessed
a birth, a wedding in Soweto. Click!
Escape took her to England, then to America where
she washed the hot iron curls from her hair
making her over to New World "Negro" woman.

27 years.
It took a hero's freedom to get her to walk
from Exile to her birthplace. Click!
Zenzile promised to return when her people were free
and could celebrate together.
Zenzile stands, greets Baba Mandela. She
places her hands to her heart and
touches the land, sifting red earth
through her fingers. Her hair draped
South African. She wears the robes
of a Homecoming Queen.

The sad children's faces that Apartheid made
smile now. They only want
bread, a book, and milk from
their mothers' breasts. A field of faces
collapses the distance as
Zenzile slices the applause
with her high pitched
Click! Xhosa style.
She takes the wind from the trees and
ripples through the crowd with her song.
Zenzile sings. Click!

The old ones call her Zenzile,
Bird voice. Zenzile, The Click song woman.
Zenzile looks out over the crowd to those who
measured to her waist before she left Soweto.
They stand tall in her view now. A picture flashes
from an album. Click! Xhosa woman
sings the Click song. Her eyes moist,
Zenzile raises a litany to her elders,
to the land for receiving her.
Mama Zenzile
home now in Soweto.
27 years of exile,

For My First Teacher

Kimiko Hahn

the starling over head
would collide with branches of birch
were it not for your call

Poultry Slaughterhouse in Red Hook, Bernardo Ruiz

Thin Nothings

Rose-Anne Clermont

"This rock is what real is, not clouds or mist, which make mysterious promises and when you go through them they are nothing."
Maxine Hong Kingston

When the other dance teachers told us you were sick
we thought you had a bad cold,
or a kidney stone, or something.
But then, they would have told us
about a cold or a kidney stone.

While you were away,
at the hospital, we weren't
allowed to visit until your memorial service,
you had left somewhere, just away.
like clouds that have moved or
spread out through the sky into thin nothings,
changing,
playing an unfair game of hide and seek.

The priest at your service
said you are still around, maybe
laughing your silly laugh,
because I can't see you?
But thinking that is not enough.

I wish I could have known you then
your skin, picked at
by Kaposi's Sarcoma
your cheeks, swollen
from the Candida Albicans
I know those terms, I know what happens
to people who have A.I.D.S...
I understand manifestations.

My aunt

dying of cancer, bald,
a cholostemy bag around her waist,
why is it alright to see her?
To see her delirious and weak?

You pretended a lot,
but this A.I.D.S thing was real, William
real as our black skin
real as the dirt I used to chew on
when I was a child, so that I could crunch
the tiny granules hidden in the earth.
Any place I dug I could find a soft clump,
but as soon as the paste touched my tongue
I would taste hardness.

I can't taste you
I can not taste A.I.D.S,
although I knew you and you died
from it, it is still abstract to me.
Ten million people is also abstract,
I know it means a lot of people,
but what is that?
Is that intermission at BAM?
No, that's not even one million people.
I can only imagine a landscape,
with people all around,
but even landscapes, to me,
have always been through frames
or windows.

I can not accept
that you have left and your
soul has remained, I don't
buy that yet.
How can I believe that you are gone
when I haven't even seen you leave?

flowers: Sometines

wednesday guyot

Flowers Sometimes have bad habits
of picking grandfathers
who wanna be boyfriends
and boyfriends who act like fathers
not wanting to be daddies
who won't even be cordial
when the babies leave

flowers Sometimes lay dormant
on beds with whitemen hungry
for the scent of desperation and panic
in Castles and grapefields
as sisters scream through clenched teeth
at the madness
at the madness
of spunk and domination

flowers Sometimes wilt
from the pressure of brothers
who grow weeds in their hair
and who seek out the convenience
of prone women distracted
and sisters hungry for a
brother's love

flowers Sometimes dance
in a world of winds ungodly
because they forget that they love themselves
stuck sometimes
strapped to chairs left listening to heartbeats
begging for a laying on of hands
and everyone needs a healing

like flowers Sometimes

'Sallie'

Jacqueline Price

Policemen, lawyers, yuppies, students and construction workers were the main customers at the place I bartended at in downtown White Plains. This mostly white, male, middle-class crowd was at its best uninteresting, and at its worst obnoxious and rude. I usually occupied my time gossiping with the waiters in between pouring beers and martinis.

The long line of the bar dissected the front of the restaurant and I had a modest view of the front door. It was a bitter cold Saturday night and the restaurant was dead. Bored, I was leaning against the end of the service bar when a little Black woman with woolly-white hair walked in bundled in layers of scarves and sweaters. When she planted herself at the bar and ordered a double Smirnoff on the rocks, I knew I would be entertained for the night.

There was a retirement home around the corner and although quite a few old people ate in the restaurant, very few of them sat at the bar. There was one man who used to come in and watch the Yankee games on MSG, but he only drank diet coke and tried to give me stock tips.

From the opening of the restaurant last January, until the day I quit in December, I was the only front of the house Black employee. Of course, back of the house, everyone was Black or Latino. There would be days when quite a few Black people came in, but that happened about as often as the average American votes. Usually, I made a show of announcing the presence of any Black person in the restaurant, it was a dramatic moment when this rarity occurred. It was very lonely at times.

I've always had a special respect for older Black people. I immediately felt kinship with this woman whose stories were written in the lines on her face. She represented my grandmother and my aunts, a symbol of Black womanhood that demanded my reverence and attention. There was an unspoken sense of community between us; a shared experience of being Black in this country, which could be manifested in saying hi to someone in passing on the street to sharing confidences with a complete stranger. Sallie was a survivor, an example of determination and strength.

As Sallie sat sipping her drink, after we had introduced ourselves, she parted her lips, and the stories started spilling from her mouth and into my ears, making an indelible impression. Her second, and current husband, Taddy, did not like her drinking, she confided. So she drank vodka, which wouldn't show on her breath as much as whiskey. He thought that she was at the store right now, she told me. She talked for hours. I encouraged her with refills. As the night wore

on, her stories got more elaborate, more outlandish. They were better than any fiction I had read in quite a while; funny, morbid and sadly human.

Sallie James was born in 1921 in rural Virginia, the youngest of eleven children. Her father, Burnett, was a sharecropper, who, with a little learning, had managed to scrape together enough money to buy the small farm that Sallie was born on. Burnett was in his late forties when he married Sallie's mother Hannah in 1908. His mother had been a slave, and he was born just before the end of the Civil War. Hannah was much younger than her husband, a small, wiry chestnut woman who ruled their household with the strap in one hand and the Bible in the other.

Sallie grew up with a taste for the land, working it with her family, in between going to the church school, where she learned to read the Bible, and to write. But her education was limited to a few months out of the year, because there were no schools for Black children in the South. There were only those stolen moments of learning that her community could organize around their subsistence lives.

Sallie left home at eighteen, with little more than earth under her nails and dreams in her head. She went to Washington D.C., to make a life for herself. She attended a cosmetology school, paying her way through by working in a dancehall, where men paid a quarter for the privilege of whirling around with the dark, pretty girl from Virginia.

She met her first husband one night when a drunk tried to get more for his quarter than just a dance. Rainey Alston rescued Sallie from the clutches of her overzealous customer, smashing his face with one left hook to the applause and admiration of the other girls. Soon, he came around on a regular basis, buying Sallie's time for the whole night just so they could sit and talk. He didn't dance. He was a big light brown man with pretty eyes, who spoke little as a rule, but talked up a storm with Sallie in those days. They were married three months after that first meeting and moved into a small apartment on M street.

After finishing school, she got a job as a beautician in a parlor in Georgetown. The customers were white men, senators and the like, who often requested her services. Her husband was a high roller, who ran numbers for Big John, who was neither big nor named John, Sallie informed me. Times were pretty good for the Alstons. She had two small children, and was pregnant with another when Rainey was called up to go join the fighting in Germany. She was left alone to fend for herself and her babies, returning briefly to her parents home in Virginia while Rainey was away.

When the war was over, the man that came back in Rainey's body was no longer the man she knew. He was a stranger, taken to fits of violence in the oddest moments. Unfortunately, Sallie was usually the recipient of these outbursts. Rainey took to drinking, something he had done little of Before the War, as Sallie called it. She divided her husband into the Before the War Rainey, and the After the War Rainey. He began to beat her on a regular basis, which she

suffered under for almost two years. When he started hitting the children as well, she packed up and left for New York City.

At this point in her tale, Sallie shoved her glass at me and winked mischievously. I poured her a double, moved her money around and leaned forward on the bar. I had stopped charging her after the second drink: I would just go to the register, call up the check number on the computer and service it out. A little bit of power makes you do dangerous things. We had a no buy back policy at the bar, but Sallie was worth it, even if I lost my job.

"Chile, would you like to hear about how I met Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. de famous Negro from Harlem?"

I was studying Black social movements of the early twentieth century at the time and immediately recognized the name. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. was a mythic figure in Harlem lore. He was a maverick, a politician, pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church for forty years. His strong voice was heard in the early Black power movement of the thirties and forties and continued on through the sixties, until his death in 1972. Although a member of the House of Representatives for two decades, he was not a 'representative Negro.' A true man of his people, he was elected to eleven consecutive terms in Congress by his district.

Besides being an instigator of social change for Blacks, he was a man who like to have fun, regardless of his marital status. He partied as hard as he fought racism and injustice, and that may have also been his downfall. He was removed from membership from the House for two years for allegedly misappropriating travel funds and other monies.

Back in 1946, his reputation was common knowledge among his constituents. Everyone in Harlem knew Powell was a man who liked a little on the side and enjoyed his leisure time. It was part of his charm. Harlemites didn't expect their representative to be perfect. It was his human fallibility that endeared him to people. He headed his own political organization in Harlem based from his church, which alone had over 10,000 members. He was unrestrained, both politically and personally, the only truly consistent things about him. He was a passionate man, who cared about his people and was instrumental in building the foundation for the Black revolution that King and X took part in.

Sallie had my complete attention when she mentioned such a legendary character, whose mythic quality made him one of my favorite figures from that period. She had met Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.— a street in Harlem! She leant forward and winked at me, she liked to wink, keeping me in suspense a little longer as she told her stories. She mentioned that Taddy wouldn't believe her about the store and asked me if I could call her house after she left and corroborate her lie so she wouldn't get in any trouble. Of course I agreed, partly because I was so caught up with her personality and also because I wanted her to get on with the story.

"Well, chile, you knows I was jus a young thing an had three babies an no man. I did my best to get a job in a beauty parlor in New York but I wasn't

certified in dis here state. So I couldn't get a job I was qualified for unless I paid eight hunnred dollars to learn what I already knew. I was forced to take a job as a cleaning lady. One day I sees dis ad in de paper askin for a person who knows beauty an makeup no certification requested. So I call dis man an come to fin out he's an undertaker an wants me to do de hair an makeup of dead folks. I didn't like de idea none, but he says it pays $50 a corpse, an back then that was a lot of money, three times what I was makin mopping floors so I takes de job.

"He tells me he's got three bodies that needs to be done in two days an I says o.k.. jus gimme de address an I'll be dere. But come de day I'm suppose to go, I have a change of heart, I didn't wanna touch no dead people. But de man shows up on my doorstep sayin 'I know you're scared miss, but dese here dead bodies gots to be done by tomorrow,' hands me a fifth of whiskey to fortify my courage an takes me to de parlor.

"When we gets to de place, de man gives me a lil tour an den shows me to de bodies. Lordhavemercy! My sensibilities was jumpin an runnin all over de place. The smell was so strong, I was afraid to look for fear what I might see be worse den de smell. But Mister Jack Daniel lent me a han an I finally got down to bisniss. It wasn't so bad once I figured dat de part dat made dem people was gone an jus de Lord's dressin was left. Dere was two men an one woman. I does de men first, dey was pretty easy. Den I gets to de girl..."

Sallie pushed her empty glass at me and I refilled it. At this point, I'm beginning to wonder what the hell Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. has to do with this story. I looked at Sallie's face, her expression of homespun wisdom made me remember the way my grandmother used to tell stories. She had that older person's way of holding you in suspense longer that a good mystery novelist. When she participated in a discussion, which she always did, she would take the most roundabout way to make the most insightful point. I smiled and resigned myself to waiting.

It was getting late and Sallie said that she had to go. I implored her to finish her story first, but she didn't want Taddy to start worrying. She reminded me of my promise regarding the phonecall and invited me over for tea later in the week. I tentatively agreed and bade her goodbye as she encased herself in the scarves and scurried out saying:

"Wait bout fifteen minutes before you call an tell Taddy that you met me at de store an we jus got to talkin an forgot de time."

I nodded and waved as she wobbled out the door. When I called, Taddy answered and I asked to speak to Sallie, saying my bit just like she told me. When she got on the phone she commended me on actually calling and not fucking with her:

"You is a true member of de race. Now I knows I kin count on you. I'll see you next Friday at one o'clock."

A week later, the old lady's charm had worn off some and I questioned whether I should go or not. But she had said that stuff about loyalty so I felt

obligated, and I really wanted to hear the rest of the story. Although the idea of going over to a customer's house and hanging out seemed a little batty. Sometimes you just have to say "what the fuck," so I picked up a pint of vodka at the liquor store and trekked on over there.

Sallie's retirement home was progressive. Each couple had their own apartment and was allowed to live fairly independently. When she opened the door she put her finger to her lips, whispering that Taddy was taking a nap. I handed her the vodka, then followed her down the hall into the living room. She poured us both tea, spiking hers with the vodka. We started chatting about the weather, which had been particularly miserable that week. I tried to put her on the subject of painting the faces of dead bodies but she would not be swayed. She took a long time to say things and she had a lot to say. So I had to wait for her to get around to it in her own way.

Finally, she peered at me over her reading glasses and winked saying:

"That Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. sure was a pretty man."

"Oh really, Sallie, what did he look like," I tried to ask nonchalantly, my wait at an end.

"Oh girl, he was tall, light-skinned with dark wavy hair, a mustache, an eyes prettier than Rainey's, an my Rainey had him some pretty eyes. He was de kind of man womens jus throw demselfs at. But let me tell you bout de girl first. She was such a pretty young thing, her throat had been cut. It really shook me. The others had been ready to go, it had been their time. But here was a girl cut down in the prime of her life, just beginnin to enjoy it. I had to call in some reenforcements from Ole Jack before I could takle dat one, it looked to be quite a job.

"Well jus as I'm gettin ready to make her up, in walks Reverend Powell with dis sad look in his eyes. Turns out he knew de girl pretty well, an she had been his sweetheart. He tells me he loved de girl an asks me if I kin make her look like this picture he gives me of her. She looks mighty fancy in de picture an I'm sure she never met his wife. He offers me fifty dollars to do it, but I would have done it jus for dat sad look in his eyes. He says to me 'Miss please just make her look like she did when she was alive and my favorite girl, make her look like I remember her. I can't go to the funeral because of appearances but it will be nice to know that she looks right.'

"I can't do nothin but agree, an I make her look much like de picture. When I finished, jus as I'm gettin ready to leave, in walks de girl's daddy. Turns out dat this grown lookin woman was a fifteen-year-old who had run away from home two years ago. An here I was thinkin she was thirty or so, Rev. Powell too. He take one look at his baby an begs me to fix her like his lil girl again. I couldn't refuse de daddy so's I spend two hours makin her look like the daughter he lost so long ago."

Sallie worked for the mortician for forty years, the giver of images of life to corpses. So that death could be a little easier, for the living left behind. I never

saw Sallie again after that day, I quit my job a few weeks later, and haven't returned to White Plains since. Sometimes I wonder about her, marvelling at her ability to weave a tale and my ability to suspend disbelief. Getting part of mystory from herstory, and revelling in her elaborate truths, her Blackness, and her 71 year-old woman's wisdom. Sallie James was a connection to my past.

Vicky Lavergne

Ésta Noche Duermo Sola

C. M.

Déjame así, esperando, sin saber lo que espero,
con la sed indecible que me dejo tu boca.
Pues hoy, mientras morían las últimas estrellas,
al mirarte a los ojos, supe que eras otra.

Aquí estoy, frente al mar, y no sonrío,
porque temo que el pecho se me abra,
y salte al mar mi corazon, y juegue
contigo, amor, y corra por la playa.

- Jose Angel Buesa

Cuando el corazón se rompe
no hay vaso que lo contenga.
Ella, tan especial...
Ella, como tantas otras...
¿Qué importa la realidad
si puedo vivir en éste infierno
al que llamo fantasía?
Mi rival fue un hombre.
Uno, como tantos otros,
Uno, que le pudo dar
lo que yo nunca pude.
Yo solamente le dí
orgásmos momentáneos:
Yo, la mujer de un momento,
Él, el hombre de su vida.
¿Pero que importa ya?
Ella no está conmigo
y ésta noche duermo sola.
Ella, que fue la protagonista
de todos mis poemas
y la víctima
de mis más poderosas emociones,
Ella se fue
y con ella se fueron mis ansias de amar.

Ella se fue
y con ella se fueron mis ansias de amar.
Cuando el corazón se rompe
no es reemplazado,
se pudre hasta tener
una melcocha palpitante
dentro de un pecho ajeno.
Pero, ¿qué importa?
ya no la amo,
si es que alguna vez la quise.
Cada palabra de su boca
fue una mentira,
la mentira más irónica de todas,
la que convirtió mi vida
en un juego frustrado.
Ah, indecisa,
algun dia sabras
que nadie te amará como yo
y lloraras con las mismas lagrimas
que ésta noche me permite.
Contigo muere el sueño más sagrado,
el que pensé encontrar en ti.
Deja que tus labios toquen los suyos,
deja que tus piernas lo mantengan preso,
y ámalo, por Dios, ámalo
como nunca pudiste amarme a mi.
Nada duele más que la palabra escrita
pero ya ves, te deseo lo mejor.
Brindo por ti y por el.
Lo unico que siempre quize
es que aprendieras a sentir
sin limitarte.
Y aquí me ves, tratando de enseñarte,
aunque palabra por palabra
vaya muriendo mi alma.
Ámalo, ámalo y porfavor
sé felíz haciéndolo
aunque solo quede yo
en éste rincón al que me condenaste.
Te amo, y por eso te dejo ir
aunque ésta noche duerma sola.

Burning Brides

Ava Ming Hu

Dressed in white
I feel like a flood of cool water
wetting the dry tongue of this dusty road.
I tread lightly on bits of broken rocks
so as not to disturb
their configuration
or to roughen the tender bottoms of
my feet.
I am leaving the courtyard behind,
dust filled and full of
chattering women who have spent
their lives behind veils,
whispering about the coming of the monsoon.
They are bound behind bars
pretending to perform whole heartedly
songs they have sung about bhakti
since they were able to speak
and remember.
I am folding myself as waves often do
beneath the pleats of my sari.
My eyes are burning like the fires I have seen
women burned in,
running into the streets
screeching like parrots
with flames hungrily rising,
eating the air.
How quickly they fall to the earth
beating their fists against
what has been long ago depleted
of water.
I am walking away from the scraping sound of matches
being struck against sandpaper.
I am drying myself of the kerosene
sister in law secretly poured around
the menstral hut.
I am summoning Vishnu
to destroy once again this world he has created
with the steady fall of a thousand days of rain.

Delia*--Goddess Of A Separate Species

leslie Peace jubilee

She sits
Stripped to her waist
On her throne
Delia—goddess of a separate species—
The mammies and breeding wenches
Slaves of houses and of fields
Their progeny—we women who gape like open flesh in ebony
Oak or sienna, we women who rise like keloids

She is crowned with history
Our language—the blistered back, space of rape, child
Sold away or aborted for salvation's sake—Delia is
The tongue of a never-whispered secret
Her tears do not fall, but her eyes await worship

Delia, shrouded in the lies of her captors, waits
Beneath layers of indignity, she waits
Naked, she waits

When does child become woman?

The first time she is whipped or raped or sold?
Or does she become woman when she knows
She is no more than the moon an error of darkness—
Delia knows, her eyes a satellite
We become the plane of orbit
We become child who becomes woman in ebony
Oak or sienna stained
With never-fallen tears

*In 1850, B. F. Taylor, a slave owner, gave Louis Agassiz, a Harvard professor, fifteen daguerrotypes of South Carolina slaves. One of these daguerrotypes is of Delia—an adolescent slave girl, naked to her waist. Agassiz studies such photographs to prove his theory that Black people were a separate species. Delia is also another name for the Greek goddess Artemis, goddess of the moon, of hunting, and the patroness of unmarried girls and of chastity.

Delia—goddess of a separate species
For salvation's sake, we come darkly to her palace
Kneel, shrink in awe
Crawl into her unblinking eyes, press
Our palms against her irises, stream down
Cheekbones to collarbone, ribcage to thighs
Shins to feet, the banks of sanctity
We become holy water
Flow against the current—

bandera bandera, Elizabeth Miranda

Sex With R.

Andre Young

"I'm from Wyoming,
consider myself an honest boy
from Wyoming. Out west the landscape
is more stark:
piles of grey stone
interrupt the skyline
of chill blue.
Some horse lovers
rent back hoes
when their horses die,
bury their pets
six feet as if burial
was more appropriate
as expression of love
than sending the corpse
to the glue factory.
At night the coyotes
come digging for hours
with black-nailed claws,
tense bodies not relaxing
until yellow teeth
pierce flesh of horse.
I am like this," he says.
Like this...

a scene of the city

Ed Shei

Wild and crazy New York nights with angel headed teenaged punks walking and talking about wars and peace and waking up at the crack of dawn with nothing but one cigarette left in your pack and smoking that one cigarette while watching the sun rise strolling and then careening throughout that old New England fog that rolls into every city on the east coast and that not even New York can escape from with its winding and wet inner city streets and blinking neon signs spewing up all their corrupt commercialism along with a side artlessness they walk through lusting and loving all there is in their meager lives when taught how sex is a long a tortured death now, rain can eat a hole through a pair of some good old Doc Martins, and how there's nothing left at all but maybe a little tv and not even that's not too good for you, but it doesn't matter at all, Obladi, Oblada, nothing really matters after seeing a friend getting shoved out of a fast moving car to meet his end for nothing more than cigarette money or maybe seeing another one die at a party in a circle of people freebasing a bong with some vodka at the bottom instead of water puking out all what little life he had in him through one open convulsing mouth in a stream of vomit and the rest of the circle just watch that old red translucent bong waiting for one more taste of ecstasy, no they've seen and heard and done it all, and nothing really matters much, nothing really matters.....

William M. Kelley

Piaf

Joju Cleaver

I tell her the traffic's too loud;
It irritates me.
She doesn't answer.

Sitting on her tattered couch
she lights another cigarette
and offers me wine.
I haven't seen her in a long time
and can think of nothing to say.

"Baby," she coos, "what's the matter?"

The way she pushes the word
through her lips.

"Baby."

Soft,
like a whisper.
Feather for a tongue.

Elizabeth Soto

when the snow comes
i lose a little
color
what was brown fades
to pale yellow
shades
faintly expressing
blood mixtures
of biology

that hair of mine
a little straighter

my eyes
i notice
are deeper set
angled different
than people i watch
on t.v.

you see
it is the
asian american
in me
placing my two feet
a minor inch
further apart
tilting my eyes
to view
a hair line
rather
than the soles
of shoes

there is
strength

lifting
belief in
my finger tips
can touch
skyscape
visions beyond
my cultural
attachment

there is
anger
occasionally
daring you
to meet
my stare
shout difference
to this face
i'call her
asian american

the pussy poem: on pussy reticence

wednesday guyot

my pussy is not as benevolent as
my smile
i do not fling it as freely as
i whip my hair.

A Humble Prayer

Okot Benge

Almighty God
Creator of Man
Listen to this humble prayer
For a second creation
A re-designing of the political Man

Lord,
You gave two front eyes
to the political man
Sink a third large one
on the back of his head
That can see far into dark past
and so avoid same mistakes.

Lord,
You designed the stomach in front
protruding and leading the way
Shift it to the back now
so that he thinks of the people first
And not his greedy stomach.

Lord,
You gave him a large mouth
shaped like Joshua's trumpet
Cut down the dangerous size
so that only honest sense comes out
Instead of lies and death.

Lord,
You gave him two ears
too few, and too tiny
Give him another pair now
large and wide like an elephant's
So that he listens more to the people

Almighty God,

Heeder of prayers
Grant this humble request
And the world shall be a better place.
Amen.

8:30 AM Stream of Consciousness 1993

Kimberly Bliss

Suburbia is a very strange thing. The safety of the tree-lined streets and manicured lawns gives one a lethargic ideal of life. Or at least it did with me. I sometimes wonder about these mundane autobiographical flashes that slip into my mind, especially during the morning rush hour number six downtown frantic crawl of a journey, that finds me being slammed left-right-and-center by crack-heads and businessmen. Same difference.

"How did I get here?" I mutter it out loud. I didn't mean to but these things slip out under such circumstances. Never mind, nobody notices. When I go back home to visit my mom I have whole conversations with myself in public. People notice. Sometimes in good ways. Like yesterday after work.

She was *fierce*. SoHo is great to work in because the streets are a fucking runway. And she busted 'round a corner and pumped her stride like nobody's business, least of all mine. But I made it my business.

The Manhattan Bistro. Despite the name it's one of the few SoHo eateries that I can afford, and Miss Thing just walked into it. So I go in. Sit down next to her. Say something to the waitress nonchalantly, something about how much is your cafe au lait, knowing damn well it's a morning drink but in my hormonal stupor these things slip by me. So I get my drink, and she gets a salad. Strike one. I hate salads and know nothing about them. She orders a drink and my mind spins in a frenzy, chastising me for the baseball analogies. So now what? I drink the cafe au lait and

—I just missed my stop. "Oh, *fuck* me!" I push towards the door, hit my foot on a baby's stroller and curse the little fucks for existing, never mind that I usually like babies. Nobody notices that I'm talking to myself again, except this old short bald guy who has the look of Freud in his eyes. Those are the kinds of subway riders who invade your space with that damn stare they have. I get off and walk through wafting smells of urine and crisp blasts of cool air. On the other side I wait for the train and I start thinking about her again.

It's so hard to pay attention to my life when I have so many distractions. Like this diva of a distraction who turns towards me and says, "Can I see the front page?"

"Sure," I look in my bag not knowing what the hell she's talking about. She laughs and by now I'm wet. This is ridiculous.

"No, there's a Times right next to you on the other table."

"Oh, sure." I hand it to her and add, "I've had a long day."

"You work?"

The vintage clothing thing has to go. Miss Thing thinks I'm homeless.

She adds, "I mean around here. I've seen you around." Her smile is sincere and her tone reeks of charm. I'm dead if she's straight.

"Yeah, on West Broadway between Houston and Prince."

There goes my subway stop again. I didn't realize I had even gotten back on. I leap up when the train stops after having only moved a few feet. The doors open and I jump through them and bound up the steps. My mode of automatic pilot gives me license to slide back into my reverie.

She leans on the back of the chair and stretches out her legs. The strange thing is— I can't remember what she looks like. I mean, what she really looks like. My memory of the sight of her comes in fragmented recollections of my reactions.

I stop at Blimpies and sit down with a cup of coffee. I rewind back to thoughts of home, suburban upstate New York. I obsess about the lawns. Such patches of green are so rare. There are more trees on top of buildings in Manhattan than there are in the ground. That is not normal. This city is not normal. But I can't leave. I've been here eight years and I refuse to leave until I have sucked everything out of it, 'cause god only knows it certainly has done that to me. One of these days I'm going to get even. I left suburbia because the traces of my life are more schizophrenic than a Jackson Pollack painting. Or Etch-a-Sketch. Not that suburbia is that boring. It has its own sense of idle excitement, but chaos dictates my happiness and off to New York I went. For what? Near poverty saved by the material trimmings that boost me into pseudo-class climbing? working class suburbia sure hates me now. But they already do. Adopted into a white family and eighteen subsequent years of thinking that I'm white because it's so much easier to integrate myself through delusion. How do I tell Miss Thing that my family is the Roseanne Barr Show and I love them— but my skin color is the color of the Manila sky at night and has built up walls of rage that only get the gut if they're ghettoized? And Miss Thing's skin color is smoother than this cafe au lait and blacker than it too. And I walked out of there with her number.

Things follow me. Everywhere I go these thoughts slice up my brain and balloon out my nerves. I down the last of the coffee, light up a cigarette and step outside. I think I'm waking up now.

Festival de las Artes, Bernardo Ruiz

Freedom Fire

Susan N. Kiguli

Crying 'Freedom'
In a limitless limbo of starvation
The mammoth of malnutrition
Manacles our children,
So later we could revel in justice.
Marching to the battlefront
Dying like rodents
Strong youths annihilated
All for a taste of democracy.
Encased in Leotards of tyranny
Fettered slaves of a mad system
We have lived like dogs
For people's liberty.
Branded fire emitting agitators
We have marched forward
To a people's victory.

But Behold, fellow Compatriot
Gaze at what I see
Our sacred blood so bitterly shed is commemorated
by numbered majestic Chariots.
Our youth so severely wasted
is remembered in
Ballrooms and theatres.
Our bravery abused by
Mad babbling puppets.

Yet our babies die unattended
Our sons condemned to
Bowels of society.
Our mothers live in hovels
Our women arrayed in tatters
Our men unpaid labourers.

Guns and bayonets
Have gorged out their eyes.

step forward brother
Living Fuel for the vehicle of justice
A human flame
To burn blind eyes open
A roasting martyr
A protest against
The Brewers of Injustice.

Eve

Krishena Peters

The night grows stars
and the moon, paper-thin,
has folded against the tops of buildings,
brushed low across her window,
and then rested center, brilliant, white.
She had begun the evening slowly in sips of brandy,
and a glass of cut-red wine
at half past nine begins her night.
The sun fell hours ago.

In the darkness of the room she prepares herself—
the sheer stockings, the too-short dress,
and the drugstore makeup
applied last beneath the lamp in the corner.
Bottle empty, the wine
has scraped the edges from her face and left
a roundness, smileless, heartless.
The sun had fallen hours ago.

She has lost her shoes.
The floor is dirty, and in the moonlight
she can feel the dust crawl
between her toes and beneath her knees
as she searches for her heels
under the four-poster
and the fake brown leather recliner.
When she finds them, she brushes her soles with her hands,
then slips them on.
She circles the kitchen once,
not fully listening to the click of her heels upon the tiles,
then reaches for her keys upon the stove
and fastens her locks behind her.
This is the last time.
The last time for this, like this.

In the street the wet air

presses her dress even tighter.
It's humid, like those nights in August, south,
when the doors of the house were left open
to swallow the breeze:
when the movie theaters were packed,
air conditioners blaring;
when she was out with the boys
on the lookout, in the backseat,
ankles resting on the edge of the rolled down window.
That night's boy would smile
because he thought that she liked him,
and she would squeeze between the hands of the clock, late,
after twelve, listening to the ticking
of the sweeping second and her heels.

Tonight, the last time, it was the same—
the cars, the rolled down windows
or cold walls, or rough beds,
stockings still pulled urgently to her ankles.
He, they, still smiled at her,
turned red, but no showed her green, at least, in the end.
Tonight, tomorrow, again, a few more,
the last time is always the last time.
As she walks, the store-fronts reflect themselves
on the doors of the cars that speed by.
The sun fell hours ago,
and the brandy fuels the motor,
and the moon continues its swing
through starred black night.
Some falls go unnoticed, some falls.

The Wedding Night

Ava Ming Hu

White lotus blossoms,
piercing as the stars,
had been harvested with hopeful hands
to camouflage the depressed middle
of our newly-wed bed.
The spellbound light of the moon
breaks through the slats of wood in the walls
making grids of light and dark
across the dusty floor,
ornamented with prints and patterns of use.
I make circular marks shaped like unfinished full moons
with my sandal,
making the first detectable mark
as a member of his family.
If I were to run my fingers over
the mountainous terrain of his nose, chin and cheeks,
the inclines and depths
would not be familiar to me.
I met him once before,
but kept my eyes cast downwards
letting the steam from the tea
moisten my eyes,
and hoped the pattern of those tea leaves
mapped out good fortune.
Mother said he spoke English
and was a Leo, a fire sign
compatible with mine.
I remember the raspy voice of grandmother,
"Your husband will be like Krishna
the emerald skinned god-lover
whose arias of flute echo
the call of a nightingale.
He will summon you with song,
and like Sati you must jump
into the blazing flames of his funeral fire
to be rebirthed through heat with him

into wind, rain, or mist."
I wear the dark as a veil from my sari
to view this breathing god.
The moon shows no emerald color to his skin.
The thrashing sound of the river,
full with rainwater from the monsoon,
rushes by the thatched hut's window.
I feel a strange hand, arm
and another arm wrap around me.
His strong hold
mixes with my fear
like a hurricane around a lone palm tree,
its green leaves shivering before they are torn away.
I remember white flowers,
whole and scented like the air before a storm.
I remember petals becoming dismembered from their body
and falling, too silent to hear,
to the bare, cold earth
who cannot take them back,
who cannot bare to take them back again.

Vicky Lavergne

Adamson Blessed

Ernesto Okello Ogwang

He brandishes the hoe
Casts a glance here, and there
And marches off

A soldier to fortune unknown
A hero destined to perish unsung
His head no simple rustic garland shall adorn
No crude monument in memento of him
His brow creased, palm cracked, eyes glazed
His chin almost totally withdrawn.

He attacks the soil like
It cursed his mother, or his girl stole
As the bright-eyes sun cynically smiles
At him.

He grows more of this or that
Responding to the government's idiot-box broadcast
To double, triple, quadruple production.

Little did adamson know he's a pawn.
A nothing in airy spaces

The cold faceless stock-exchange
That unfixes prices
Knows nor cares not, for this adamson blessed

That night ants made love on his unsold crop
And the next day he was arrested; his
Balls tightly tied; adamson was marched
To jail, he'd not paid his taxes
His crops, unsold, a mattress for ants.

i dream of walking past, letting it go

Elizabeth Soto

but i will go on in anger
filled to finger edges
of injustice
wanting to file away
everything distasteful

i will go on in anger
until the last stone hits
the earth
resounding through our roots

i keep that circle going
shoveling fists down your throat

for my children born of womanwomb
i would fear
i will grant
them a legacy
in anger fighting
what was never lost

i will extend to them
my identity
my song sung in prayer
for my almost darker color
my tilted eyes
full lips
for my too light skin
this is your identity too
legacy of flesh
legacy of soul

Country Wench*

Tusingwire Jotham

In front of me, after the night rain
Early in the morning, in a narrow dewy path
A stout, dark, robust frame
Leads to her daily routine on the farm.

A baby strapped to her back
One in front, another trotting behind
On her head rests a colossal basket
Laden with various contents:
Four split dry firesticks,
And a bundle of potato stems visible.
On her back a wide dark patch,
A conspiracy of soil and baby-urine.
A few flies buzz by the baby's eyes.

Suddenly she totters, sways and staggers
And there- poor creature, crumbles
On the muddy slippery way.
The child yells from the back with pain
The basket is thrown away, scattering contents
And many they were:
A handful of salt wrapped in pumpkin leaves,
A cluster of ripe bananas,
A chunk of cold millet bread,
Scattered cooked cold beans,
A five-litre jerrycan of water,
An aged black peeling knife
And a shattered calabash splashed with millet gruel.

*In Uganda, the term "wench" more commonly refers to a female peasant farmer and does not carry the negative connotations present in American English.

A smell of tobacco smoke, a cough from behind
And there he was, her dear man
Growling and spitting curses and abuse
Accusing her of carelessness and stupidity
Attired in a patched and tattered one-sleeved coat
And an aging unique pair of shorts
Evidently having once served as trousers.
Panga and hoe in hand
He approached the scene, and I
Still gazing with pity, feared him
And, hearing the bell, took off to school.

Ghosts and Smoke

Jamesmith III

"Diego, put your toys away. I f something gets broken, you'll be crying all over the place and it'll be too late."

"Okay, Mommy. Mommy?"

"Hmnn?"

"Howcum I gotta put away all my toys?"

"Somebody might step on them, baby. Oh shit. I always do that."

"Why don't they just—"

"Baby, hand me that towel. No, the green one. That's it, *mijo*. *Gracias*."

"Well?"

"'Well' what, baby?"

"Howcum...Howcum...Howcum...If people gonna step on 'em, howcum they don't just step over 'em?"

"Step on what? Ah, *dios mio*! This pilot light is gonna drive me crazy! Where's the matches?"

"I know where they is, Mommy! I know where they is!"

"What? What did you... Diego! Stop that! What did Mommy tell you about running in the... Diego! *Ai*! That boy...!"

"Look, Momma! I got the matches! See?"

"Diego!! Put those down, right now."

"But...Howcum? Whassa matta, Momma? I got... I got... I got matches, Momma."

"*Mi dulce*, just do what Momma says and put down the matches, okay?"

"Okay, Mommy."

"Come here, come here, baby."

"Whassa matta, Momma? Howcum you crying? Mommy...?"

****

"Inez, you okay, babe?"

"Yeah, Roberto, it's cool. How was your day?"

"My day was fine, babe. Why are you smoking? You ain't touched a cancer stick in weeks."

"Don't remind me. My hips're as wide as a house."

"You always was the one to go changin' the subject n' shit. Whassup? Why can't you talk to me?"

"I just got a little bit of a scare is all. I'm okay."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm cool."

"What happened?"

"Nothin'...Don't look at me like that. An' stop petting me, you make me nervous. Siddown."

"Inez. Babe, are you...?"

"No I am not and you're and asshole if you think that's the only thing that'll piss me off. I just saw Diego playin' with some matches is all. He's okay, I'm okay. It just kind of reminded me of my little Maricela is all. She was so sweet..."

"Inez? Inez? **Inez!**"

"Get your hand outta my face..."

"Put that shit out. I don't want nobody smokin' around my kid. I had to deal with that shit all my life and it smells like crap. My eyes used to sting when I'd go anywher near my father's room an' I don't want Diego to go through that shit too. Now lissen: Maricela is gone. I loved her too. I still love her, but we can't bring her back and talking about it like this is only going to make things worse. Gimme the ashtray, I'll throw it out..."

****

"Roberto, pass the peas, will you?"

"Here you go... Diego, how ya doin' champ?"

"I'm fine, Daddy."

"Don't talk when you eat, honey. Close your mouth, you're getting gravy all over your shirt. Ah, you little monster...."

"I'm a monster! I'm a monster..."

"Diego! Put your arms down and eat your dinner! Will you...Put them down! You wanna give me a hand? He's your son too, y'know..."

"Let 'im be a boy, Inez. I had a son, don't make him into a girl."

"Momma?"

"Yes, baby?"

"When's Maricela comin' back?"

"Soon, honey. Soon."

****

"Well, Mrs. Pavel, has your son exhibited any antisocial behavior? You know hitting other children, breaking things for no reason. That sort of thing."

"Uh... No, not really. Diego is really a very nice boy. He does everyhting I tell him to do, even if I have to say it several times. He just keeps talking to himself."

"It's not uncommon for children to develop 'invisible' friends, as a means of coping with loneliness. You did say that his sister died, didn't you?"

"Yes, she died in...In a fire. Maricela and Diego did everything together. I know he misses her a lot, but he had a lot of other friends as well. He doesn't

like to play with any of them now. I don't understand it. He seems so normal when he's at home, but then he turns into a goddamn hermit at school. Oh, my language, I'm sorry."

"That's quite all right. Tell me, is Diego into any sports?"

"Well, he's just a little boy, you know. He likes to watch football with his father on the weekends, and sometimes they toss a baseball around; but he doesn't even want to do that anymore."

"Oh, his father is around often?"

"He lives here. What made you think he didn't?"

"Oh, no particular reason. I just wanted to know."

"No, there was a reason. What made you think my husband didn't live here?"

"It was strictly a standard question, Mrs. Pavel..."

****

"Yeah, Luisa, so then she says 'Oh, is his father around often?' and I say sure, he lives here, y'know? And she makes like it was all in the name of science, y'know? She can't even own up to the fact that...What? No, he's okay. It's fine. That bastard knows Roberto didn't take anything, he's just another American with a chip on his shoulder. *Que*? Oh, it's cool, I'll just have to start working again. Diego's in school now, so we don't have to worry about day care or any of that junk, thank God. Is that Celo? Yeah, I can hear the ol' bear from here. Okay, talk to you later. bye."

"Diego? What are you making noise about, honey?"

"Mommymommymommymommy!"

"Diego, *mijo*? What's that matter?"

"Mommymommymommymommymommymommy!!"

"Diego! Diego! Oh shit, I'm coming. Diego? Honey, Mommy's here. Wake up, baby, you're having a bad dream! It's okay, baby, Mommy's here. C'mon, honey, calm down, it was just a nightmare."

"Mommy! I saw—!"

"I know, baby, it's okay. Calm down, Mommy's here."

"No, Mommy! I saw Maricela, Mommy! She was standing right over there, Mommy! I wanted you to see her, that's why I called you. When the lights came on, she went away. Why did you turn on the lights, Mommy? She—!"

"Maricela wasn't there, baby."

"Uh-huh, yes she was, Mommy! I saw her right—!"

Put your arm down, Diego, and go back to sleep. You did not see Maricela."

"Uh-**huh**! She was right over—!"

"**Diego**! Mommy said go to bed, didn't she?"

"But—"

"Diego"

"Yes, Mommy. But—"

"So make Mommy happy and put your head hown and go back to sleep. That's it, baby. I'm going to my room now. Goodnight, baby. Give Mommy a kiss. That's it, honey. I love you."

"Mommy? When Maricela comin' back?"

"Ssshh...Go to sleep..."

****

"Aahh...Another day another blister. Gimme that paper, I circled a couple jobs that don't look so bad. How's my clothes?"

"You look fine. Eat something before you go."

"No time, Inez. If you woke my up on time, then I coulda gotten something—"

"Look! I apologized already, didn't I? Shit..."

"Honey, I ain't blamin' you. I fuck up all the time too. It's cool. You look pretty tired yourself, maybe you should get some rest."

"Later. I gotta take Diego to school."

"Okay, but promise me you'll get some sleep."

"Sure."

"And put that cigarette out."

"Yeah..."

"See ya."

"Baby, you're coughing. Are you okay?"

"I can't breathe, Mommy. That smoke's stinky."

"Oh, it's just a cigarette. It's cool, you'll live."

"Howcum you gotta do that, Mommy? It's so stinky. I can't breathe—"

"What the hell is this? I can smoke if I want to. Don't forget who you are, young man. I'm your mother."

"Mommy, I'm—"

"Don't give me any of your shit! I'm tired of people giving me all this crap! Now go to your room!"

"Mommy—!"

"Shut up!!!"

"But—"

"I said shut **UP**!"

"Oh, baby, what did I do? Diego? Diego? Speak to me, baby. Come on, baby! Talk to me! *Ai, dios mio*! *Ayuda me*! Please, baby, I didn't mean to hit you so hard! Please, I'm so sorry! Please, *mijo*, talk to me! Speak to me!!"

Kimono

Michel Ng

Kimono wrapped tightly around your waist,
trapping your body
showing its lines.
Wooden *geta*
hobbling
frantically hobbling along the cobblepath
of faces,
of face.
Click Clock Click Clock—
Motion stifled by bindings of the past
woven into the starched fabric of your soul.
Strong *sakura*,
standing alone amidst the harsh frost
of tall skyscrapers, old businessmen, greedy hearts,
unfair margins.
You walk abruptly in the cold
don't walk too fast I say,
you run.
Are you afraid of falling *tomodachi*?
Your sturdy *geta* made of wood
will always return from whence they came.
Your soul may soar
but your *geta*,
your *geta* will always remain of the earth
embraced in her warmth, in your *ki*.
Geta hobbling, quickly hobbling
Wooden platform upheld by two sticks:
our *bushido* of honesty,
our *bushido* of pain.
Fall then,
fall *tomodachi*.
Do not be afraid of the ground
if not for it, we would keep falling
not knowing how to suffer,
not knowing how to cry.
Rise anew,

rise like the morning sun
from the haze of the shallow horizon
Emiko san.
And remember always,
that no matter how tight
the kimono of your soul may feel
it will always remain glorious and beautiful
to me.

Kaneem L. Smith

Cry Freedom

Okot Benge

Cry Freedom, cry
Weep bitter tears
To wash the wounds of Africa
That tell the shameful tales
Of strangled Independence.

Cry Freedom, cry
Wake the fear-gripped sleepers
To the mockery of self-government
Where editors' pens shy from naked truth
And prisons have gluttonic appetite.

Cry Freedom, cry
For you pissed into the Authority's eyes
And in a single dictatorial arm swing
Your manhood was ripped off
Leaving you castrated and helpless.

Cry Freedom, cry
For your tears bathe our hearts
Creating rivers of uncontrollable force
That shall one day burst the banks
Washing the dictators off their seats.

Vicky Lavergne

For One Black Child in an All White School, 1967

leslie Peace jubilee

See that little girl
digging with a stick in the dirt
making maybe mud pies
or burying maybe her dreams

She has heard sounds
like sirens with no glare
breaking nights
The white-robed me
call her by name

The only good nigger
is a dead nigger

Call her

Louder than as hard
as she can press
the heels of her hands
against her ears

The only good nigger
by name
is a dead nigger

Call her

See that little girl
her back against the wall
of her lace-curtained bed room
praying to be good
willing herself a dead thing

So maybe she can walk
tomorrow to school
without being seen

unmolested

The only good nigger
inhales her own screams
freezes in her veins
her blood
is a dead nigger
squeezing her arms across
her chest

Call her

blood red heart

beating

unprotected

in the daytime beats through
the voices that break her
nights
and bury her dreams

The only good nigger
stares at the ceiling
when she could be sleeping
walks on eggshells the mile
to school

Plays in dirt
burying this thing
blood red
to good
to be strewn
at the hems of white robes

Shapes in mud
the resistance for her
imagined babies to eat

Brother and His Sax

Daphne Ósàyadè Dumas

He sits on top of his dugout
at the Saudi-Kuwaiti border.
This barren earth is not the kind in Shea
where players are greeted after sliding
into home.
It is home for Operation Storm.
A sandpile for troops in the desert,
home away from homelessness, unemployment
and mis-education.

This soldier has taken his saxophone all the way
from Harlem.
His duffle bag is filled with food rations, change of clothes
his hair pick and a crumpled picture of his girl friend.
Doesn't know why he is there,
waiting to fight a people who look just like him.
He sits caressing his sax as if he were
holding his old lady,
belting out Coltrane, Satchmo, Miles and Leon Thomas.

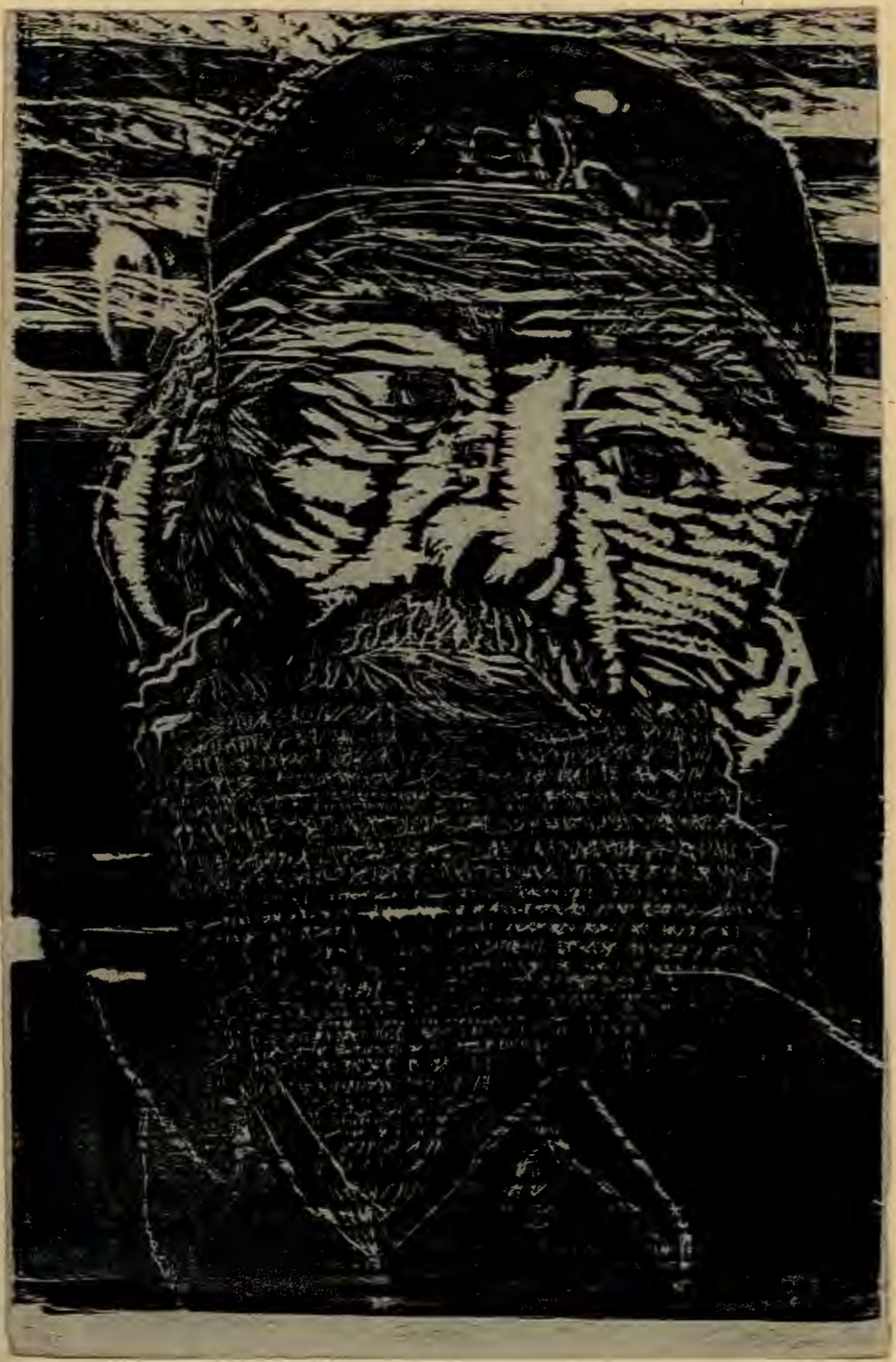
He doesn't like the noise.
He just sits there, playing his sax just as he has done
on Lenox Avenue, jamming with the boys at Wells,
and around the corner at a hundred and 43rd.
He closes out the sound of planes overhead,
eclipsing the quiet.
He continues to play.

He looses himself in that moment,
lulls into ecstasy.
He hopes to hang on to his sax
while he plays to his old lady wishing he were home, away
from destruction, war.
He lifts the sound one octave up, then lowers it.
He removes the mouth piece, packs up his duffle bag.
The army sargent calls out
Ground patrol begins.

american dreamer

wednesday guyot

there is a woman in my class
pissed of
because all her money
and tennis lessons
couldn't get her through
them pearly gates
toward white legitimacy.
such a joke
singing the star spangled banner
with a mexican accent
smelling of gringo spit
and shame.



Fidel, Elizabeth Miranda

When, Where and Why I Entered or, What Harlem Means to Me*

Randall Kenan

> Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?
> Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison

Who am I? Who are you? Well, that's the point, you see. The point being identity. The question being who, what, when, why. The heart of it, the down, dark, dirty and nasty of it; both generational and genetic, gender and G-spot. For me it was (is) a strange alchemical journey, a curious calculus of soul and body, an ongoing battle of self in the early stages of a long war of identity. Who am I? Can I tell you? Better perhaps to concentrate on the question which for me raises more and yet more questions. About race. About culture. About region. About assumptions we all make, have made to remain sane, to live our lives, to progress in some earthly fashion.

But what do you do when you suddenly realize all the definitions handed down by the media and the textbooks, all the assumptions public and private, familial and societal, are inaccurate? When you realize that you have been calling geese, goats and possum, penguins? When you must re-define who you think you are and ask larger questions about society? What does it mean to be black? A simple question. A stupid question, you might say. Everybody knows. Descendants of Africans? Or more precisely, Yoruba, Ashanti, Baule, Ibo, Hausa, Jie, Ouadai, etc.? Or something more? But a question so obvious none ever seems to ask it anymore. And yet who can say?

What Black means to me. For years, decades, I thought I knew. Then suddenly I stumbled upon the idea, that all my assumptions were false, all my beliefs suddenly replaced with deeper, more profound questions. What does it mean? What did it mean, to be more accurate, for there is a journey I mean to imply. Is it genetic? Is it cultural? This Blackness everyone seems to speak of so authoritatively, so knowingly? Do genetics and culture truly mix? Can culture grow from chromosomes and amino acid? Questions, questions, questions. Who had, has, the answers? But slowly I hit upon the keys. Not keys to the answers, of course, but to the correct questions, the true goal as all good scientists know.

There were three things. One. Two. Three. One involved skates. One

*This essay is from a forthcoming book, Walking On Water: A Journey Into African American.

involved Hardees coffee. One involved the New York City subway. They all involved Blackness. Or what I thought it to be. One day when I was lost... First, yes, first, — much like the Apostle John's gospel — was home. In the beginning was home, and home was with me, and home was me. all things were home. And what was home to me?: a house, white-shingled on a farm, surrounded by fields of corn, soybeans, tobacco; a forest across the dirt road, full of squirrels among the oak and sassafras trees, possums, wild cats, deer; tractors and men in coveralls; old women with snuff deep in their bottom lip; black men, white women, black women, white men. Not much else. Nothing else. Black and white. Two views, two possibilities. For me one certainty. I, we, us, were black. They, them, those, were white. This was home. Specific. Rural. South. Black. Chinquapin, North Carolina, 1963 through 1981 in the years, as James Agee so aptly put it, "in the time that I lived there so successfully disguised to myself as a child." This was my vision, an inherited vision, a preordained text, inviolate, sacred, as ancient as the Amenhotep throne and as omnipotent as Yahweh — this vision of being Black. This came first, yes, first. The idea of self.

But in the beginning came the idea, handed down like two songs from my father's father's fathers and my mother's mother's mothers resounding through the cottonfields of time, a legacy of sorts, specific in fact, unmovable in concept. What did it mean to be Black? In the beginning, in my mind, it meant a pointillism of culture. Collard greens. "Amazing Grace." Grits. Tote. Quilts. Thundering preachers. Pigs feet. "Swing Low Sweet Chariot." Head rags. Chitlins. "Chain of Fools." Root workers. Prayer cloths. Signs and symbols of a culture out of which we, I, perceived a brilliant canvas of history and linguistics and religion and music and fashion and, of which, we were, are — and rightly — proud. But more than bits and pieces, at home, in the beginning, there was also a testament of thought binding all these particles, for on those rare occasions when we stood back to see it all as one would a Monet, we divined whole a portrait of endurance, strength, love, community, respect. Platitudinous in retrospect, but sublime in practice. Or so I thought. Or more precisely, so I thought for all Blacks. For this assumption was part of what it meant to be Black. In the beginning, at home.

And at home this perception was mysteriously corroborated on Sanford and Son and in Ebony magazine, by my cousins up in New Jersey and New York, by those lying textbooks and invidious blaxploitation films of that wasted decade in Superfly, Cotton Goes to Harlem, in Shaft, cause he's a bad muther — shut your mouth! Black was one seamless, undifferentiated culture. And I stood proud. We all had an enormous amount to be proud of in Chinquapin, NC: Tubman, King, Prosser, Angelou, Bearden. Ours. My family — teachers, businessmen, farmers, military men — taught me and taught me well about being Black. But this was the beginning. In the beginning. The Word. Black.

But first, yes, first in my journey, this journey of which I speak, were the skates, in a skating rink in Wallace, North Carolina. December, 1988. My first

clue that something in my perception was amiss, something left out in the beginning.

Home, in 1988, had in fact changed. When I grew up in the bosom of a large, overly-extended family, in the home of a saintly great-aunt, spied upon by aunts and uncles and an inexhaustible supply of cousins, Chinquapin was much like it had been in the 1940s. Population was less than a thousand. Farms were, if not prosperous and thriving, surviving with the coastal cash crops of legend; the churches's congregations were strong and committed, a binding agent in the community; many secondary roads were as yet unpaved, and gardens and livestock supplied most of the table fare. Not to romanticize the era: schools were not desegregated until 1969; medical care was twenty-five miles away and then not particularly competent; water was pumped from private wells, and many people had no running water.

But by 1988 Chinquapin had been thrust, more like yanked, into the heady whorl of the post-modern era with a state-of-the-art EMT ambulance, InterState-40 less than nine miles away making the town something of a suburb; a new water system; a factory; a video store; cable television; a supermarket and two convenience stores. Aside from the bristling, technological invasion, for me — fresh off a DC-8 at the nearby Ellis Airport, now replete with a landing sleeve and rotting luggage belt — for me, Chinquapin was a land of ghosts: bereft of my cousin Norman, old when I was born, who taught me to tell stories and drink coffee; of his son, Roma, a teacher and farmer who taught me how to crop tobacco and kill snakes; of my grandmother, from whom I learned good business sense, how to be regal under pressure, and how to shuffle cards. I could not help but hear these ghosts about the rooms and fields and barns, now empty and relic-like. And as sentimental and shamefully nostalgic as it may sound, groups of people no longer sat about on porches and talked, instead they watched television. Most farms had been bought up by larger farmers, and church congregations seemed sparse in comparison. Most sadly the old folk seemed yet older, more frail, halting, ethereal. My fellow classmates had all, like me, moved away after school, while the number of tombstones seemed to multiply exponentially. I know there exists a sinful danger of artificially raising those elements of the past of which we are most fond in our minds, to supplant those painful, passionless and pathetic memories much closer to reality, to belie the facts of endless days of dead inertia and boredom, of strife of every manner, of small- mindedness. Chinquapin did, and still does, abound with a multitude of hateful truths. But on Christmas vacation, 1988, I must in all honesty admit to being blind to the whole cloth of the past, and to succumbing to the safer womb of pointless pining and dreaming after those past shadows pungent with meaning to me. Then came the skating rink.

Of course there was, is, the present: chaotic, hard, real. The present of my family. The present of my grandfather, emblematic of my family strength, recovering from a disastrous burn accident and fully recovering at the age of seventy-

three, and of my brother-in-law literally rising from the dead after a near fatal illness. The present of my larger-than-life sister starting a third career, Candi and Nikki, rambunctiously high schooling, my great-aunt whispering about retirement. Of this person who had a stroke. That one who had a baby. This one who had altzheimers. Nothing to romanticize about 1988.

I offered to take my nieces to the movies. Okay, they said, fine. And they would take me to the skating rink on Sunday. Fine, I said. I haven't been skating in years. They giggled. I watched HBO.

Sunday, December 18, 1988. No one had told me, but in truth I had been prepared. Indirectly. I had seen all the signs, the music, they way my nieces talked to me, the way they dressed, the body language, the music, most importantly the music, for this is about music and Blackness.

We arrived at the rink, Skate City, at around nine o'clock. They said everyone gets there at around ten o'clock. It was important to be there at ten. Why? I said, assuming my older niece had a crush on some boy who was to rendezvous with her then. Cause, she said. That's when they start to jam. They giggled.

Skate City, a concrete bunker, long and flat, gussied up in that American recreational way, with the requisite indoor-outdoor carpet, walls brightly painted in fat strips, the same as in memory. Except for the kids, kids, kids. All Black kids, surging about like hordes from "The Birds." Vivacious, loud, in candy-colored running suits and reeboks, beautiful, noisesome, happy, young. All Black. I remember thinking how odd that we still managed to segregate ourselves with such energetic tenacity. Or was it merely natural? And I remembered the contrast between my earlier trips to Skate City, the calm, much smaller, integrated crowd. In fact I remembered my family being the only Black family there at the time.

My older niece, Candi, and I got our skates, buffeted by the crowd, and took to the treacherous floor. Me, stiff and unpracticed, a monster out of Frankenstein, she, much surer, skating backwards, bopping to the top 40 — Black — beat. We zipped around the rink with glee, playfully, the music speeding us along. I noticed the crowds building, building. Girls and boys, all Black, pouring, quite literally, through the door. Nine:fifty-five. An announcement: "All skates much be turned in, please."

I turned to my niece, "Huh?"

"We have to stop skating."

"Why?"

"They're going to dance now."

"Huh?"

But she was already on her way to turn in her skates.

At 10:05 it began. Harum scarum. Higgledy-piggledy. First came the music. Loud. Dangerous. Verbal machinegun fire, barely intelligible. Full of gusto. Militant in its assertion. Rapid. Syllables like bullets. Needles scratching

across vinyl creating otherwordly techno-nuevo dimensions, earthbound by the thump. The beat. The beat. Rap. Everybody in the house say Eyeeaaahaa! Eyeaaahaaa!

Not that I had never heard rap music before. Quite the contrary, only weeks before, ironically, I had been what amounts to reverse acculturated back into liking rap music, which had just begun to emerge from the underground and take hold of the zeitgeist like so many Body Snatchers. I had been a stumble-footed fifteen year-old the year the Sugar Hill Gang came on the scene. A-hip, hop, hippy to the hippy. And Curtis Blow and those grandfathers of the rapid-fire sing-talk. But by senior year I and a number of my friends had become disenchanted with a form which seemed to have reached its artistic peak, and which seemed to find no purchase beyond soporific rant and rave, and three or four rhythmic variations. Yet how many babes are pronounced dead only to mysteriously live on to become heads of state? Or in this case revolutionary warlords? In the cauldron of Hollis, Queens and Bed-Sty and Watts and Southside Chicago, the infant recovered and went to the school of the streets, and now, in 1988, a meager seven years later, was less an enfant terrible than a homme d'guerre. Rap. A rootin-tootin warrior, risen from a premature burial, funking up the place.

But this place was Wallace, North Carolina, home of the poultry factory, tobacco warehouses and two textile mills. Where the best meal out was barbecue from a supperhouse with a side of coleslaw and hushpuppies. The site of the Battle of Rockfish Creek in the War Between the States. The largest city in the county of Duplin at around 20,000. My home.

Yet before my eyes those kids, from eight to eighteen, had taken to the rink, the now dance floor, and were conjuring up some post-industrial Damballah, with bytes for teeth and microchips for eyes. They did not so much dance as jerk, jerk, jerk their bodies to the beat. Clad as they were in acid-washed jeans, running suits, sweatshirts, heavy gold chains with their names spelled out so large a Stevie Wonder could see them bobbing about their necks, topped with Kangol caps, and their teeth flashing metal. They created a voodoo atmosphere so foreign to me, with its demi-urgic Tropic of Cancer humor, that if someone told me I was in Kingston, Jamaica or Jamaica, Queens I would not have flinched. Jamaica or Jamaica? An even draw.

For as I stood there transfixed, trying desperately to make odd sense out of the odd happening, I realized how effortlessly these youths of my homeland had assimilated, accommodated and accepted an ethos — the rap hauteur — as their own. Had all this been transmitted through cable TV and the local record store? Pop magazines and clothing stores? Had I been seven years younger would I be out on the dance floor reebok-shod, robotically undulating to Salt-n-Pepa? Had home — fixed, inviolate, sacred — shifted so radically in so short a time?

I am not, nor was I, ignorant of the way Black culture unceasingly reinvents itself. The way blues, rag, jazz and R & B evolved up and down the Eastern Seaboard, from traincars and whistlestops to the Chickenbone Special, out from

New Orleans to St. Louis to Chicago, from NYC to Buffalo to Detroit to parts unknown and back. I was respectfully aware of the sophisticated under/above-ground railroad of culture translated into a sophisticated music and language which blossomed into a way of being in the world. Winged idioms. Viruses of culture.

So why did I stand like Moses before the burning bush, inarticulate and dumb, vaguely disquieted by the feverous celebration? Disquieted because in the back of my mind I began to consider on what level these my young and animated kinboys and kingirls, related to the music to which they boogied. Especially now, with my having firsthand knowledge of the areas which spawn this electrified hellraising. Few if any of those dancing before me had witnessed city projects and street gangs, had felt the gut-twisting fear of being picked off by a sniper or the claustrophobia of six to a one-bedroom apartment. Few had seen a building taller than four storeys, let alone a subway. On what level did the music, this entire lingua franca, communicate with them? I could understand how the vernacular resonated with 300, 3000 years of signifyin(g), how "stupid fresh the def jam" was. But this jubilee was beyond celebration of the new, it went deeper than mere roll-n-rock hysteria, spoke more profoundly than response-to-boredom Beatlemania. This was tantamount to religion.

And again the disquiet. Why did I sense something to be wrong? Was it the attitude or the music? The dissonance? The dejection? The sexism? Was it this body language? Communicating a machine-like detachment from their bodies symbolizing a rejection of their bodies's worth? I felt this to be true of many of the city dancers lost in an urban wasteland. Was it true here too, in agricultural Duplin County? Were they truly relating to this music? Or was I merely an old fogey at twenty-five? Declaiming: O ye wicked generation, looking for a sign. No longer able to synthesize at the speed of light the hip, the skinny, the beat. But I too liked Fresh Prince and Kid-n-Play and Public Enemy and L.L. Cool J. My trepidation then — or so I convinced myself — centered on a deeper level.

Driving home I pondered and riddled myself, unable to satisfy my questions. Aware of having experienced something vital and phenomenal and altering. But exactly what I did not know.

This was first. One.

Two. Two is the middle. Two is Paul and Silas. Two is the divisive number. Two is intellectual: thesis and antithesis. But we cannot go on unless we go through the gate of two. One, the inside. Two, the outside.

Two was two days later. Two was me and my friend Randy Page.

Randy is my high school friend. My white friend; and in many ways my closest friend. My intellectual soulmate. Which goes beyond being namesakes. Randy, a raven-haired, rail-thin, attractive sort, bespectacled, by turns gravely

pensive and quixotically mirthful, with a penchant for affecting the down-at-heels Southern gent, had just earned his Masters of Theology at Union Seminary in new York, and had begun doctoral studies in Church History at Vanderbilt.

This night we drove about Duplin and Lenoir counties, looking for a placed to have coffee and jaw. Our favorite pastime. In so short a time we had become accustomed to New York's perpetual schedule and had taken for granted that a coffee shop or some such place would always be readily available. Perhaps a diner in NC? No luck. By ten o'clock doors were shut, lights went out and Evaline or Ernestine or Sammy were snoozing before the comforting purr of St. Elsewhere.

At about twelve we decided to cut our loses and settle for Hardees, the MacDonalds of the South, a study in orange plastic and tile, brightly lit and smelling of french fries. A number of folk drifted in and out; high schoolers giggling reassuringly in one corner; truckers imbibing coffee the way trucks do gasoline.

I hovered over a ham biscuit and coffee trying to make sense of my experience of two nights before. I was not doing a good job.

"So?..." Randy always played the role of intellectual superior. Irascible, impatient, quick. My job was thesis. His antithesis. We would synthesis by committee. He was left brain. I right.

"But what about it struck you as so peculiar?"

I hemmed and hawed, unable to formulate and argument, I recapitulated the event, embellishing it, creating a narrative.

"But what does it mean?" Pushing, always pushing. An exercise in interpreting experience. Randy cannot abide an unexamined life.

Inelegantly I began to draw some parallels with Nietzsche and some ideas about societal progression, saying that Nietzsche was right up to a point, but that it was also logical for a group to evolve into something similar to nihilism — the amoral antecedent of bourgeois values — but into another less negative form of the Superman. My kids, I postulated, throwing in a bit of G.B. Shaw for good measure, were an example of these new superfolk. Their attitude and mechanical detachment evidence of the shift. Pretty good I thought.

Randy regarded me with a doubtful glare. He took a beat that would have made either Stanislawski or Senator Sam Ervin proud.

"You know what your problem is?"

He annoyed the hell out of me when he played this sort of role.

"You can no longer see yourself as a part of history."

"Excuse me?"

He went on to delineate the work of one Ernst Troelsh. A theologian around the turn of the century, considered more a prophet than a theoretician, he predicted/prophesied that a time would come, a generation, near the end of the present century, which would no longer be able to see itself as a part of history. They could see history, understand history, but would not be able to see them-

selves in it or be able to effect it.

"Excuse me?"

He went on to say that I suffered, we both suffered, from the onus of this prophesy and no longer felt ourselves a part of the onrushing river of chronology and its detritus. We were stuck on the riverbank. He pointed out protagonists in my fiction caught on that riverbank, unable to insinuate themselves into time and suffering due to it. A Troelshian hero. He called me a Troelshian hero. Evicted, mysteriously, from history.

"Me no get it."

I liked my Nietzsche evaluation better; and we came to no synthesis that night. But the idea, like some unwanted child, remained with me. We talked of other things that night, the Reagan White House, Margaret Thatcher, Yuppies, the post-industrial work ethic, but I never came to a satisfying interpretation of the skating rink. And now I had another bugaboo to contend with. The Holy I. The divining rod. Had the inability to understand, my discomfiture in the presence of Southern hip-hop, come from my inexplicable divorce from my folk? Had I somehow lost not only the comprehension but the connection to my people? What if nature had somehow churlishly banished me, sent me packing without home or hog mawls, black eyed peas or boogie-woogie? What then? And what were the ramifications for my Blackness? For my generation? How can you be Black without understanding Blackness?

Preposterous, I thought. But the thought lingered, lingered then festered. And like all sores split in two. Two.

Three: the witching number. Beware of three. Three is the magic number. Three is the woman at the well. As Bettelheim says: "Three is a mystical and often holy number..." Three is tricky. Three is deadly. Three comes at you from three sides. Three is me.

Me in New York. Ah, New York. Spangled, spiked, spread-eagled, spick-n-span, splattered, splayed, swirling, city of sin. City of fun. City of danger. Sodom, Gomorrah and Bethlehem. Place of skulls. Canaan Land. Land of Promise and Decay. Homeless women begging quarters in ATM corridors. White stretch limousines with black-tint windows. Crack addicts running down Tenth Avenue. Financial analysts in rainbow-bright suspenders and Beau Brummel suits. Ladies of the evening in bikinis and leather jackets. A Black mayor. Polyglot, multicultural. Capital of the world.

Not Chinquapin, North Carolina, I learned long before I got off that first 747, steeped in national NYC lore from the age of five, reading in Newsweek and Time, seeing the NBC Nightly News. La Manza Roja. I was scared to death. But I was not alone.

Everyone has New York stories. Ten million and counting, they blend into a mosaic of truth and lies, anxiety and bliss, cantankery and child-like awe.

Something has to keep all these people here.

Work kept me here. A livelihood, a Horatio Alger wish — if not there where? If not there why? A story so old it chafes with telling; sags with burden in meaning. But my message is not the coming, not the staying or the fun, but the real estate. A place to live.

Also legend within the city of opportunity: the tight squeeze of so many souls with bodies: where to live? How to find a place affordable to one making barely above the minimum wage? I first lived with relatives in Newark. I next moved to the Upper West Side. Then Queens. Brooklyn. The West Village. Hell's Kitchen. Peripatetic dwelling, also a given.

But the truth is, during all the perambulation and vagabondism, as I searched frantically through newspaper real estate "for rent" sections, courted realtors, begged friends for apartment tips, and subleted, shared and subleased, my eyes were set on Harlem. Sweet, sweet Harlem.

It came to my mind like a sixth grade composition. What Harlem means to me. Jazz. The Cotton Club. 125th Street. The Apollo Theater. The Schomburg Library. What... Junkies. Mugging. Shootings. Infant mortality. Run-down tenants. Harlem... Malcolm X. Abyssinia Baptist Church. Edgecomb Avenue. The Theresa Hotel. St. Nicholas Avenue. Means... Marcus Garvey. Duke Ellington. Countee Cullen. Langston Hughes. Jessie Fauset. To me. Black.

No doubt about it. Harlem, U.S.A. Symbol. Bold and Black as life itself.

Yet for one reason or another I was barred from entry, or so I thought. One place would not even look at someone with a salary less than $50,000. One place, though in a building with a transcendent exterior, horrified the soul in its paint-chipping, bowed floor and catpiss-smelling interior. Back and forth. Back and forth. Two extremes. Rarely a middleground.

Plus I had practical reasons to consider. I worked in mid-town in the 50s and on the Eastside. Why complicate matters with a commute (it's exceedingly tedious and time-consuming to get from the western reaches of Harlem to the Eastside) — instead of living nearer to work, or at least nearer to a trainline which cut down on time?

Through chance, luck and practical reasoning I found places, but they just weren't Harlem. And though there was no logical reason, I would feel an enormous guilt in the back of my mind, almost a subconscious nagging; though I would ramble about 125th Street, visit the Apollo, the Schomburg Library, the Studio Museum, visit friends on 135th Street, 143rd Street, Hamilton Hill, I would feel slightly embarrassed when I had to say I lived "downtown." My family, distressed at my physical vacillation, would ask: "Well, why don't you just find a nice place uptown. It's certainly more affordable." Many of my relatives had lived for decades, decades before, in New York, in Harlem, and it held the same meaning and connotations for me, in fact they had given them to me. My brother-in-law had grown up in Harlem, and story-spun for me a mythic

Harlem of wonder and excitement throughout my growing up. But I would stubbornly answer that they did not truly understanding the dynamics of the present real estate market and the fact that I had friends all over larger New York who tended to congregate in the middle of the island. Still they made it known, subtly and unsubtly, that real black people in New York live in Harlem. Those outside of it were pariahs.

I mired and mucked about in my guilt, in a way almost unconscious to me, thinking myself in someway a pseudo-Black person, irrational though it may seem now. The choice was to be Black and live in Harlem, or live elsewhere and be something Other. Consciously I came up with rationalizations, secretly suspecting the few reasons I had offered up were water-solid and microchip-thin.

Perhaps, in truth, I had deliberately not searched hard enough. Perhaps I was afraid that to live in Harlem was to invite an onus of negative connotations I might not live down among my professional — mostly White — colleagues. Perhaps I was secretly ashamed, despite my bold talk of pride and knowledge and work, of being Black. After years in an integrated school system, four years at a predominately White university and now struggling with the manners and mores of corporate America and having an integrated social life, had I now betrayed my culture? And what of those other Blacks across the city, who did not live in Harlem, how did they deal with, think about, their Harlem, the capital of their culture? Silly, illogical, foundation-less preoccupation worried me as I turned Harlem into the Mecca and Medina of the religion of Blackness, with me the heretic.

Until one evening when I was arguing with a young woman, an Ethiopian, a direct descendent of Haile Selassie, a princess and anthropologist, who had spent a great deal of time in Antigua. We lingered over coffee, quarreling.

"You North American Blacks, you make me so angry. You set yourselves off from the rest of the Diaspora. As if your experience was somehow better. 'We suffered more.' When in fact the slavocracy of the Caribbean was much more brutal."

"That's true, but what separates us is not only the insidious psychological shackles of our slavocracy, but the extent to which our bloods intermingle—"

"Bullshit. You think there was no rape and creoles through the world? That doesn't—"

"But it goes beyond that. We've become a part of this country in a way no other Black group has become a part of a country in the world. I mean, we made this country. We still do. Why was slavery instituted in the first place? Free labor. And look what that labor created, materially, for better or for worse. Moreover, we've contributed to every aspect of American life, scientifically, legislatively, militarily, artistically. Hell, we are America. We have more claim than anyone other than the Native Americans. We've been here for three hundred years, for christ's sake. I don't mean to disparage the Diaspora, but how can we ignore our blood-and-sweat connection to the land, this very land here? Hell, this

is my country too, just as much as it is for any white man, if not moreso..."

As I went on with my oration I slowly became aware, in a way I had not before, how strongly I believed this. Days, weeks, months after that debate the idea stayed with me: How integral Blacks are in the fabric of America. And slowly it dawned on me that my subconscious guilt over not living in Harlem, silly as it was, was not guilt at all, but fear. Fear of being estranged from my culture, fear of losing some essential Blackness which I was at a loss to pinpoint. A question not of a place, for I realized that Harlem was simply a place, nothing more, nothing less, a place of splendid architecture, inhuman squalor, fabulous wealth, a collection of neighborhoods of all steps of life, just as New York as a whole is, but at the same time, as they do now, and created and reinvented themselves, again and again.

But here lies the largest irony. For I had been so blind that the blindingly obvious had not taken hold: at that time I was living in Ft. Greene, Brooklyn, home of Spike Lee and a thriving Black Bourgeoisie, not far from where I was born; and before that I had lived in Rego Park, Queens, another predominately Black area; and I would later live on Manhattan's west side, Hell's Kitchen, a place which before the first World War had been heavily Black, Harlem before Harlem. While at that time Harlem had been predominately affluent White people, and devoid of any of the associations I held so sacredly. Irony of ironies. Were these places, the present repositories of Black culture in some way illegitimate in my eyes? Could Black culture only exist north of Central Park? The more I thought of it, the more the foolishness of my obsession of the idea sank in. The very idea that Black culture was, could be contained was absurd. Clusters of Black people exited all over New York, on the lower Eastside, Flatbush, Crown Heights, Jackson Heights, the Bronx and beyond to the north in Yonkers, on to Buffalo and Toronto, beyond to the south and west in New Jersey, Washington, Virginia, Florida, and as far west as Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles. These places were not embassies of Black culture on the outskirts of some mythic White nation, they were the nation itself dwelling fully within. That very moment.

But as I came to a deeper understanding of my fear of estrangement, it led me to wonder about that nation and how it was changing and how little we actually knew about it, in all its multifold and powerful manifestations. Moreover, how were people like me, living on the borders of that great nation, constantly in danger of being subsumed by a larger non-culture, defining themselves? What did we look to to understand what it means to be Black? Beyond objects? Or are these nuts and bolts of culture the culture itself? Where does one begin and the other end?

This then explained in part my initial disquiet in Wallace, North Carolina, for I was attempting to solve an equation with too many unknowns. These being the most crucial elements of the problem: how is the great nation within a nation evolving? With rap music and desegregation and attrition in schools and 50% of young Black men in prison and a rising rate of teenage pregnancy and more and

more black mayors and judges and representatives and the first Black governor and unemployment and drug abuse and The Cosby Show and a Black Joint Chief of Staff and AIDS and the glass ceiling — so many problems and accomplishments — how is this vast society, yoked to a larger country, thinking of itself? So much is said and written about the "facts" and "realities" of Blacks in America, but rarely have individuals across the country testified as to how they see themselves. In the media and in books, the assumption is always made for them, always on the periphery of discussion, a given. But how do they define themselves? What do we really know about the whole of Black America, and what changes in our perceptions would a more comprehensive knowledge bring about?

This was three, triangular and sharp-pointed: Where does the myth of the descendants of the slaves end and the reality of the African American take over? Thirty-five million people. Sixty-three states, provinces and territories. An entire continent. Three hundred years and counting. Three.

One, Two, Three. These are the ideas which have plagued me and must be addressed: One, the idea of Black culture as a dynamic organism, doing it's thang, with the ability to reinvent itself and grow; Two: the idea of an individual within a culture defining himself by or against that culture; and Three: the myth of culture, the perception of a culture within a culture, and the dangers of underestimating, narrowing or limiting an entire people by a set of truths no longer held to be self-evident, which bear lesser and lesser relation to reality.

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