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Heirlooms

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HEIRLOOMS

by

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Bachelor of Arts
Bowie State University, 2007

Master of Arts
Clemson University, 2009

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in

Creative Writing

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2013

Accepted by:

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DEDICATION

For my mom who had my first poems published in the third grade and made me feel like a “real” poet; for my dad who, after I decided to move to Colombia, South America, started learning Spanish, thereby teaching me what support really looks like; for my grandparents, who are the inspiration for my work and the source of my drive.

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ABSTRACT

This creative thesis is a collection of poems and an essay that explores the concept of defining the self through the influence of personal and cultural heirlooms. It is particularly concerned with the inheritances that children receive, whether they are a pair of stockings or a political atmosphere. This collection consists of six sections, submitted in partial fulfillment of University of South Carolina's Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing.

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SECTION I

INTRODUCTION

I was sitting on the front porch of a mid-income level house in Cartagena, Colombia in Blas de Lezo neighborhood where the road was in shambles, but the stucco houses were well built and the floors were laid with ceramic tile. Neighbors of varying levels of education worked as landlords, office clerks, taxi drivers, housewives, and so on and all had college hopes for their children. The big kids played soccer and baseball on the high school field down the street. The little kids played soccer in the shattered concrete street between a few parked cars. On this bright blue cloudless day, a man rode by on a horse and cart. He might have been searching for scrap metals to sell or lugging fruits and vegetables. I felt sorry for the regal, tired brown horse pulling that cart. His head hung parallel to the ground and he watched his feet plod the street. He had probably pulled that cart since he was old enough to do so and will probably pull it for the rest of his life. Neighbors chuckled at the man riding the cart. His clothes were in decent condition, his hair plain, and his eyes on the horse in front of him. He too had probably ridden that cart since he was young and will probably ride it for the rest of his life. For me this illustrated life being inherited. Every person in that neighborhood, including the cart man, had inherited his/her position (or lack thereof) from his biological forefathers/mothers, from his national forefathers, from the nature of the local political and social situation, from an unforgivingly bias economic system

This collection is a meditation on things handed-down and takes special interest in what and how nontangible inheritances are passed to children. It explores strong and at times unacknowledged ways in which the past influences the present; the persistence of tradition and its effect on progress; the nostalgic yearning for the unquestioned African American community of yesteryear, which is debatable whether a woman and person of color should want to return to an earlier time; and the impossible return home, where home is a temporal or geographical location or a former state of being.

It was through my study of the W.P.A. Narratives for the Ghosts of South Carolina College project (an iPad application that shows the enslaved people who built and maintained antebellum U.S.C) that I began to think of how age impacts racialized and gendered people. What is considered normal for U.S. childhood? What is unique about African American childhood in the U.S. for females? What for males? What events in a young life become pivotal in forming individual racial identity and concepts of difference? What came out of this is an interest how others impose a racialized identity on a child. The child spends a very small portion of a day looking at herself and considering her own skin. However, other people see this skin first and most, and they interpret it as marker of personality, interests, attributes, abilities, etc. To address these concerns, I considered how identity is formed for young people, with a concentrated focus on the impact of familial and non-familial influence and how that constructs self-definition, self-perception, and racial identity.

The key familial influence in this dynamic is the grandmother figure, who in these pieces is often the one who does the passing down of these nontangible heirlooms. It is most important for her that her story to be remembered and that she teaches the young

ones what life has taught her about love and danger and how to survive both. For example, in the “The Sweeter Juice,” the grandmother figure is the intervening voice and has wisdom beyond that of Western medicine. Her nature-based expertise gives her the ability to save a life by sharing the curative knowledge of blackberry tea.

In “Amulet,” she is the encouragement to go further and farther, while still reverencing home. She pushes younger generations to take advantage of the benefits of education but is still concerned that formal education might replace home grown wisdom.

The grandmother figure occasionally stands as a historical comparison and marker for progress. She shows that progress is neither impossible nor complete and lends an appreciation for the progress that has been made (“Dear Black Barbie” for example). However, she also marks distance in “Channeling Janie,” where the protagonist is in search of her grandmother’s lost stories and wisdom. This is the middle of the collection, which is composed of short prose. This section was very much inspired by Nikky Finney’s collection *The World is Round*, in which the prose section entitled “Hurricane Beulah” holds the two halves of the collection together. Here “Channeling Janie” explores the major subjects of my collection: concepts of home, family, The South, how these inform selfhood, and how the formation of a racial identity informs selfhood. Moreover, “Channeling Janie” is a slower exploration of how heritage and race can be elusive and ill-fitting concepts. The narrative in this piece interrogates authentic blackness as it relates to dance and the authenticity of a dance as it relates to blackness. It searches for aspects of the self, of the speaker’s grandmother, of racial identity and history; it questions the performance of blackness, of dance, and of authenticity; and it

investigates how the (non) racialized body is seen versus how it sees itself, how that effects behavior/performance, and whether it should?

While many of my poems yearn for certain historical inheritances, *Heirlooms* complicates the act of intentional and unintentional passing down by looking at toxic inheritance. For example, the title piece explores nontangible heirlooms that are passed down from grandparent to parent to child, such as recipes, appropriate behaviors, stories, building and sewing skills, style of walking and singing, as well as one's livelihood and dreams; however, a major heirloom in this piece is the inheritance of violence. The pink gentleman inherits the social and legal right to enact violence against the young brown female, who inherits this risk of being violated. The young brown couple inherits an inability to protect themselves and their loved ones. Aptly, no pink lady appears in the poem; she inherits a state of removal, silence, and not knowing or pretending not to know.

This piece was inspired by Thelma Eubank's interview in Ellen Levine's *Freedom's Children*, where she remembers,

My grandmama used to tell me stories. Her and my grandfather were on wagons and horses then. They could be riding through Liberty or Amite County, and if a white man wanted her, she got on the back of that wagon with him, and my grandfather dared not turn around. When they got through with her, she just got back up there and sat beside him and kept going. (11)

This account melded with Melba Patillo Beals's memoir *Warriors Don't Cry* which is set two generations later. She describes how she escaped an older Caucasian American man's attempted to rape her as she walked home from school. The older man was

reacting to the Brown v. Board ruling, which places rape in this context as a hate crime, act of terror, method to maintain the social order, and a political protest.

The complexity of toxic heirlooms continues with “Lost Boys,” where young males inherit flight through the absence of older males. This piece returns to the inheritance of violence. Not only do these particular males develop a psychic compulsion to enact violence at the slightest offense, which as Frantz Fanon attest is in response to inheriting an overarching social pressure; they also mimic the physical, mental, or emotional absence of their male predecessors.

These toxic inheritances pair well with “The District” in which a father encourages his son’s vulgarity, women pass a legacy of young motherhood, Duke Ellington students embrace their artistic heritage, and Howard students engage in historical debates. All of this occurs in a city that has such a prestigious cultural and intellectual legacy. The architecture of greatness is tangible, but those who are fully aware of it can embrace the rich intellectual and artistic legacy as part of their personal identity.

From Michael Jackson to media depictions of blackness to Dollar Store nails to Barack Obama, in this collection, non-familial voices also influence a child’s concept of self, intelligence, beauty, love, worth, etc. in relation to race. There are a few pieces in which familial and external voices exist in the same space. “White Girl,” for instance, pits the voices of grandparents and parents in competition with those of classmates—Caucasian American and African American girls and boys. It focuses on consequences of naming, characterizing, and categorizing blackness, coloredness and otherness. The African American children show a complicated relationship to race and their racial selves

in their insistence of hair straightening, despite the damage it may cause, and their affinity (and unspoken hatred) for light-skinned, “good haired” people. Both because of and in spite of this, they live by toxic race definitions that involve good and bad hair and skin color, as well as dualistically opposed white and black ways of speaking and being. Furthermore, in this piece, the Caucasian American characters explore already established racial boundaries through experimentation. They see difference and test it with an observational comparison of skin pigmentation and the use of a historical slur. All of these children represent inherited biases. Despite the insistent voices of the grandparents and parents in this poem, the young speaker is not able to stave off these persistent definitions, perceptions, and constructions of racial identity and, in effect, self.

With a slightly different outcome, a much younger speaker contests external definitions of self in “I first became black when I was four.” Directions from home teach how to resist coercion and how to perceive the self in a rainbow of shades rather than a Manichean construct of black and white. This instruction stands strong against the whims of young children, but when they are measured against a teacher and a religious context, the child is defenseless.

Finally, “Dear Black Barbie” addresses the internal impact of these external influences—how a child might process external concepts of race, love, beauty, and worth. White Barbie becomes a sex object to the child. Even though she doesn’t yet know what sex is, she knows that White Barbie has a type of beauty that is socially elevated above other types of beauty. Black Barbie becomes a tool in a fantasy in which White Barbie is the star. Black Barbie does not have the right to womanhood that would prevent gender transformations and functions only as a fill-in for who or whatever may be needed. In this

piece, Black Barbie struggles for the right to define herself and her beauty and she becomes the projection of this struggle for the reflective adult speaker. The grandmother figure appears at the end of this poem as what the speaker asserts is a need, as a necessary for balance and self-love.

Much of my approach to this familial and non-familial influence is a product of the hypersensitivity that comes from being away from home and nation. While I was writing this collection, I was able to cultivate my curiosity about the African diaspora as a Fulbright Fellow to Colombia. My project was called Parables from Palenque: Identity Formation and Preservation in and through Oral Literature. I was located near the Caribbean coast of Colombia in San Basilio de Palenque and Cartagena. San Basilio de Palenque is a town founded by Africans who escaped from Cartagena slavery in 1603. During this period, Cartagena was the second most active slave port in South America. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Palenque was one of many Cimarron (fugitive slave) towns; however, it is the only one to have been granted emancipation during colonial slavery, it is the only town to survive with an intact language (which has its own distinct grammatical structure and is a mixture of West African Bantu languages, Portuguese, from slave ships, and Spanish), it has the only existing Spanish-based creole on the South American continent, and its citizens still practice Kikongo customs, songs, dances, and rituals.

Toi Derricotte's *Tender*, which includes as its first section "Exits from Elmina Castle: Cape Coast, Ghana" was the inspiration for my section on Palenque called "Diaspora on a Crowded Bus." Elmina Castle was a fortress built by the Portuguese in 1482 and it housed/stored thousands of Africans at a time. The Africans shipped from

this port were not just the Fante or Akwe of the region. They were brought from large distances to Elmina, then shipped primarily to northern South America and Brazil. Since there is a possibility that Africans were shipped from Elmina to Cartagena and since Lengua, the language spoken in Palenque, contains phonemic elements of Portuguese, Palenque and Elmina can be connected in the poetic imagination.

In this section, I make a concerted effort to resist speaking for another people, place, or time; instead, I work at preserving images that document a truth. I have avoided writing persona poems from the perspective of a Palenquerro, and instead I keep myself as the explicit narrative voice in the poems. I do this not to silence the experience of Palenquerros, but instead to avoid assuming I know and understand their experience so deeply that I can speak for them. I try to balance a journalistic illustration of place with the poetic work of uncovering turns and contradictions at each line break, by questioning what it means to be African American in this space, whether there is a way to return to a West African home, a relationship to salvage, what terrors have been packaged for tourist consumption, and so on.

These poems introduce place and identity conflicts, which include concepts of displacement, erasure, ownership, and access, as well as my personal identity conflicts in Cartagena and Palenque. They deal with erasures that are not just a physical removal from historic and tourist districts but are historical erasures (at times through reappropriation) for both low income and dark-skinned people. These poems also speak to the experience and relationship of previously colonized people with each other and with intact colonial spaces.

In particular, “Mammy Dearest” deals with representation. Black women have not owned their image in historically colonial societies, but they find modes of using the usurped and warped image to their advantage. Nancy Green was the living trademark and corporate actress for Aunt Jemima pancakes and Hattie McDaniel was an early African American (U.S.) screen actress. During these periods both women played the only role available for black women—the Mammy. The Mammy was one of many archetypes created by ante- and post-bellum Caucasian American Southerners to depict the beneficence of slavery and servitude. The Mammy loves to care for her owner/employers and their children, has several of her own children who she neglects, and has a contentious relationship with black men. She is overweight, very dark-skinned, and wears a headscarf, long dress, and apron. In 1989, the standard Aunt Jemima logo was changed from this traditional Mammy archetype to a slimmer, lighter woman with a pearl necklace instead of a headscarf. This poem underscores how black women have empowered themselves by donning a costume that grossly misrepresents them, which is what I witnessed for Palenquera women in Cartagena. This poem is the namesake of the “Mammy Dearest” (1991) episode of the sitcom *A Different World*.

Finally, the last poems of “Diaspora on a Crowded Bus” speak to how authentic blackness is only understood as it existed in the past. Despite the presence of washing machines, showers, indoor plumbing, cable, internet, and the prevalence of Blackberry smart phones in Palenque, visitors to Palenque choose to only see the river washing, the outdoor kitchens, and the naked babies. Outsiders want to see places like Palenque as primitive, unlivable, and anachronistic to a modern world. Colombians designate Palenque as the place where authentic blackness lives and this concept by affect whitens

or lightens everyone else and disenfranchises other forms of blackness. Meanwhile, in order to maintain their uniqueness and viability as a heritage site, Palenqueros must cling to the past, must be relegated to the past, and must continue to practice outmoded customs and traditions; while at the same time, modernity persistently inserts itself into and is welcomed into their daily lives. This is a double-edged conflict of survival that questions whether it is better to survive with the support of the unveiling future or in spite of it.

As I built these poems, audience was a major concern. While writing this collection, I was active in the local Spoken Word community, which meant I was performing regularly on local and regional stages and was a member of a slam team. In that sphere, audience response is immediate and audible. The audience signals to the artist which lines impact them, places that are convoluted, and sections that lose drive. The Spoken Word community provides what many artists have trouble finding—attentive and willing reader/listeners. This was a great tool for large scale rethinking, revising, and editing and since one of my goals is to engage the layman, being a part of this community and considering the reception of a non-specialized audience became an important part of my process. Poets like Patricia Smith, Ayodele Health, Tara Betts, and Roger Bonair-Agard became great teachers and showed me that I don't have to balance the line between Spoken Word and academic poetry, as I'd thought. Which is to say, the two don't necessarily exist as separate fields and I don't have to find the exact median and confine myself to the space that exists between two potentially disparate cousins; instead, through the example of these poets, I can exist in the liminal space that allows

me to actively engage the two fields simultaneously, see them as working as one, and still produce respected work.

Overall, *Heirlooms* is part of my contribution to the discourse on race and self, youth and race, inheritance and agency, and heritage and place. It is the beginnings of a conversation I am still learning how to have.

LIKE TALKING DRUM

We sit nights
 talking
me and this plum dark man
 eating oxtail,
strong, sweet arms
 like J. Wray rum.
He balances instant hot chocolate
 on saucers
 in teacups,
glides on machete-quick feet
 upstairs,
 juggles imaginary fútbol,
back
 to the kitchen
 to cool Pillsbury cookies
on his oven.

Long overdue conversations
from plump lips
through sun-bleached teeth.
Listen for that small voice
on the wind.
We speak words buttery
like peanut
with ancestors
over our shoulders.

Stripped-down, athletic vowels tangle
with lopsided Southern tongue.
Close enough to feel pores exhale,
our words wind
to the rhythm of seaside congo.
Our buried belly-button cords,
root, sprout, connect
our worlds.

He's been waiting generations
 to teach me the smell
 of ackee
 the bitter-hard
 of sorrel.
I've been waiting
 to feed him grits

SECTION II

San Basilio de Palenque is located near the Caribbean coast of Colombia, South America. It is a town founded by Africans who escaped from Cartagena slavery. During this period, Cartagena was one of the most active slave ports in South America.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, Palenque was one of many Cimarron towns; however, it is the only one to have been granted emancipation during colonial slavery, it is the only town to survive with an intact language (which has its own distinct grammatical structure and is a mixture of West African Bantu languages, Portuguese, from slave ships, and Spanish), it has the only existing Spanish-based creole on the South American continent, and its citizens still practice Kikongo customs, songs, dances, and ceremonies.

DIASPORA ON A CROWDED BUS

1

We Live Here

But at the end of the day
we pile on a packed bus,
leave the sparkling skyline
to the travelers.
We return to humbler places.
The cement streets shambled
like glass and pocked
with stray-dog feces.
The dirt roads sharp with jagged rocks.
Our children play futbol
in the streets.
They walk the six-foot high porches
and know how to not fall.
During the day, we balance just as well
in the Walled City.

2

Soapbox Washed

In the Walled City, the buildings are not candy colored
greens, blues, and golds like in normal barrios.
They are champagne beige.

Balconies, wrapped with vines,
reach out to each other.
Towering doors, tall as their mother trees,
welcomed giants
or gods.

3

Fried Fish

You'd suspect they enjoy
putting those unforgiving bones,
that proud head, those accusatory eyes
on the pillow of coconut rice
for foreigners who have never seen
scales left on a tail.

They panic,
send the plate back to the kitchen,
blush apologies to the table,
whisper, "Can you believe?" to me,
not knowing that this is how
my grandma cooks fish.

4

Atlantic

When we scuba dive
I half expect to find bodies
a circle of hands that grab me
make me kiss their petrified cheeks
and fear the water
the way normal black folks do.

I only see reefs, Cheetos bags,
small skittish sharks
in a sea of discarded.

The Tour

We bus to the Castle.
I expect a grand dining room
and princess's bedroom
but this is a misnomered fortress.

We visit the highest point in Cartagena
the Pope's house,
trimmed in gold and decadence,
where God told him to throw a goat
off a cliff.

We take pictures with the statue
of the one-legged, one-armed, one-eyed
pirate who attacked the city
and nearly won.

Then we end where we began
at El Torre Reloj.
Grand colonial arches repeat like waves.
It's right near the harbor
so Africans could step from boat
to auction.

This place evokes images of insurrection—
pass word to ones who hear your tongue
braid seeds into cornrows
in the pattern of a map
a drum syncopates a rhythm
another answers *Now!*
be deep in the jungle by daybreak.

When the bus stops
the only history the tour guide gives is
"You can buy souvenirs here.
Bathrooms are in the back.
The shuttle to the hotel leaves in 15 minutes."

Strangers

The Palenquerra sweeps past Las Bovedas
 in her wide dress, splashed with primary colors.
 The silence of her bare feet
 contrasts with the clop of hard soles.
 She's seen me before.
 I know her brother.
 I wonder if we should kiss cheeks.
 Her practiced smile drops.
 She wipes her hand on her apron
 and gives it to me.
 Her other hand balances
 the basket of sliced mangos
 and watermelon on her head.

She was one boat away from speaking English,
 Portuguese, Yoruba,
 or nothing at all.
 I was one boat away, too.
 We could have been neighbors
 or rivals.
 She sells fruit in the place that she escaped from
 400 years ago.
 I'm touring the place
 like I don't already know
 the persistence of colonialism.

We grab hands like strangers
 like sisters who've never met.

Palenque Barber Shop

At the *Ne York Peluqueria*
the dreadlocked barber shaves
circles into the crown
of one young man's head.

Not etched like age
away from the smile line of the Boni
to announce strength.
Or under the eyes of the Akwe
to rep his hood.

This is "Damn, nigga, that's fly!"
Except they don't say nigga
They say, "Somos Bantu."

Mammy Dearest

“Why should I complain about making \$7,000 a week playing a maid?
If I didn’t, I’d be making \$7 a week actually being one.” –Hattie McDaniel

Smile, Palenquerra.
Gather your skirts.
Raise your molasses arms.
Your chin is more leveled than a soldier’s.

Your cousin has changed.
She has forgotten what it took to sell
Happifyin Aunt Jemima Pancakes
Sho’ sets folks singin.

The new Jemima sees you and finds you embarrassing.
Your long red dress with big blue flowers,
yellow apron, and pink head wrap
assault her new found sensibilities
as a woman of the 90’s.

She sees shelves stacked with statuettes of you in souvenir shops,
clutches her pearls, spits words like
Unbelievable! which stick in the humid air.

Smile, Palenquerra.
We come from Nancy Green, The Pancake Queen.
From a woman who kept her hair flawless
but still covered it under a yellow bandana.
Someone who had a life and family in Chicago
but told stories like the best thing that ever happened to her
was the Old South Plantation.

Ms. Green shoveled sweet self-rising ready-mix pancakes
into eager bellies who needed songs from the golden years
and they took her home
mammy in a box, smiling at every breakfast.

Palenquerra, we knew well how to swallow a self to survive.

9

Sepia Tones

The French lady pans left over the plaza
winding the crank on the side of her camera.
Old men play checkers with Aguila and Club Colombia bottle tops.
Young men wait near their motos for passengers.
Benkos Bioho screams in the far left corner.
After centuries, he is hoarse.
The guy in the NY fitted hat is the Medicine Man.
He can help you see spirits.
A young boy grinds corn flour with a mortar and pestle
bigger than he is, hewed from wood, then petrified.
Another trots by on a donkey.
The gas truck kicks up dirt in the road.
A high school boy's Blackberry chimes,
he answers through an earpiece.

She tells me the camera was manufactured in the '50s
and makes things look really old.
Perfect for this place, no?

10

Weight

We are seen through the tattered down ruins of Elmina Castle,
as skeletons of forgotten Sudanese pyramids,
from wisps of ancient mysteries,
defined by cobblestoned colonialism.

Our right handle forged from relics.
our left handle of carcasses,
both molded to the sides
of amorphous blackness.

SECTION III

AMULET

College girl returns home with her education rubbed on and shining like Vaseline, stands up in front of the church in a pants suit, shares her grades and experiences, as is tradition. She crisps her Rs, NTs, and INGs like ironing was a natural part of speech. When the Mothers greet her after service, she pontificates on womanhood, says she doesn't have a boyfriend both and because she doesn't need one. This to women who have been wives and mothers for most of their lives. They smile, hug her, say *Keep on keeping on*. They remind her to be open to good things and good things will come. They don't say what they want:

God speaks your mother tongue just like he speaks that other tongue.

Don't get too big for home.

Who untaught you to call a pocketbook a purse?

Instead, they rub more Vaseline on, give her a pair of stockings, and watch her walk into the holiday cold. They send one prayer behind:

Remember home. Remember home.

TOO SOON SEPARATION

To stumble from the sleepy warmth of a bread oven
where the world is round and two voices vibrate
a melody through ribs and fluid,
where the sun is always horizon hued
and pulsing the rhythm of our song.
To stumble startled, cold, and pressured
like a peach into some stranger's stumpy gloves
was like saying *Our time is short*.

They cut us at our centers. The fleshy braid
that links daughter to mother to mother
full of the first sweet taste of milk and mom,
the place that points east to our someday home.
Cutting my stem was like snapping a chord
into discord.

Round arms wrap me like pot soil.
We are still sound, touch, and music.

stick to her like pollen,
bloom from her—
magnolia.

HUGO, 1989

We camped out
 in my parents' room glowed
with lamp and lightning slippery

 wicks nursed flame in oil whispers
and wails cracked the corners
 of the house. Rain one-finger

 shushed us. Dad measured time
by the sound of hundred-
 year-old trees fainting, Mom

by only-child breaths.
 That small girl did not
have to beg but was wakened,

invited to a candled room
 of covers and snuggled
to the thrum of thunder.

GARDEN THIEVERY

When I heard the snap of the thickest, greenest
stem of the prettiest, pinkest flower
in Grandma Janie's garden,
I learned two things:
 certain stems have the echo of a window breaking and
 grandma could run.

She chased me clear into the house and under
mom's legs. I rushed to mom
with the greenest of stolen goods, just because
and because it reminded me of her.

Grandma probably picked a leaf
from a cousin's plant or one snug in the backwoods
and rooted it for weeks on the kitchen sill.
Then just before the moon dilated,
she would have carried it
the way she carried full teacups
and tucked it into the flowerbed.
She would've spoke *youcans* to it
and what else should you say
to a life plucked from a larger self?

THE SWEETER JUICE

Blackberries are born green then grow pink
as a newborn. They soak up all the color
in the sun until red turns purple turns purple-
black with oil sheen shine
berries

clustered and bursting like galaxies
we huddled in the hospital
after we returned from the Bahamas.
Everyone sick but me.
Nestled close to the vines tubing
out of my little brother.

By then, the color in his nailbeds
and eartips had kissed his whole body
brown. He outgrew his baby curls,
but after baths he still
had that fresh baby smell. I remember it

like it only lasted a couple of days.
At home he slept in his big boy bed
but at the hospital they quarantined him
in a clear cradle almost too high for me to see
through the plastic. His arm was in a cast
to hold the IV they said, and he was sleeping.

I, having healed several people in those young days,
touched his cast like a pre-school prophetess pulling
holiness and anointing out
of the universe through my plaits
and said *Lord, please help my brother.*
Then we took him home.

I didn't know he had been in the hospital for weeks
that he was always vomiting always
having diarrhea always hungry
too weak to cry for too long
and too little to fight
the parasites. I didn't see

the dark sunken rings around his eyes
or feel his ribs poking through his stomach
I didn't hear them say *We can't do any more.*

*Take him home.
Try Pedialite.*

I just remember praying like I did two years before
after my mother's miscarriage. *Lord, please
give me back my little brother
and he went back
into my mother's belly.*

As it turns out, blackberries stain fingertips
and sippy cups alike. When they are cut,
they have smiling amethyst lips
at their core. Thank God for that reverend
woman who came from herb picking

midwives whose breath always smelled
of mint or muscadines Thank God she felt
the urge to pick up some mothered vinegar
and for the chance meeting at Bi-Lo.
*Take some blackberries and make a tea.
Then his stomach will hold something.*

INTERNET RECIPES

College girl guides her parents through the Wal-mart supercenter picking out fresh cilantro and thyme, kalamata olives, Oakleaf wine. She spent the morning watching Gordon Ramsey Youtube tutorials and mixing recipes from foodies worldwide. She printed the instructions, the ingredients by recipe, and the ingredients by location in the store with an approximate price for each item.

She hates spaghetti now. She's enjoyed uncooked meats, the addictiveness of espresso, meals that cost half of the family's bi-weekly grocery bill. Her palate has outgrown her mother's cooking.

When they get to the register, they look at each other for several seconds before the father pulls out his checkbook and untucks the Bic pen from behind his ear.

The father and brothers carry the groceries into the house. The brothers complain about being part of *another experiment. It's not that we don't want you to cook. We just want regular food.* College girl starts at 1:00, the sun still high over the house. The brothers, having just eaten breakfast and lunch, are searching the kitchen for a midday snack. *What you gonna do with them carrots. Don't put no onions in mines. I'll be back to taste test.*

College girl starts pots of water, pans of meat, finely chopping and adding vegetables, all in a pre-determined order. She swirls wine, dabs oil, stirs butter. Flash of heat, shock of cold water, puff of steam. The smell flavors the house with impatience. Bubbles rise thick and pop, grease strikes, meat sizzles. She gets frequent but-when's-it-gonna-be-done visits.

The mother sits at the table, asks for the umpteenth time, "Can I help?" Finally, college girl accepts. The entrée won't cook through and the rest had to be slowed to match the pace of the entrée.

The mother grabs the spatula. They move like tornados around each other—pirouette, merge, separate. They repot, send dishes to the table or sink or fridge or oven, taste and add and add because the online databases didn't account for their taste buds.

The mother finishes off the entrée, says *My mom used to cook a dish like this. Of course, we didn't call it what you call it. We just thought it was farm food.*

College girl calls the father and brothers to the table. They smell of Doritos and cashews. The appetizers are on plates, the entrée and sides are dished in the center, two cartons of juice, and dessert is in the oven. College girl sits down for the first time in hours. The mother follows with glasses of ice and napkins. The family feasts on this, the new ideas that college girl brought home.

WHY YOU MIGHT (NOT) WANT TO DATE A SOUTH CAROLINIAN

Pack no-frizz shampoo.
Don't bring winter clothes. They won't go here.
Stock up on allergy medicine.

Understand: yes, can't, that, dark, in, and, trash, bread, door
are 2-syllable words. When a person walks up happy to see you,
don't assume that you know him/her. When a man reaches for your bags:
yes, he is trying to take them, no, he isn't trying to steal them.

Understand: fire, hire, flower, shower, oil, boil are 1-syllable words.
When it takes 3 times as long to get through the grocery store checkout line
because so-and-so is catching up with so-and-so, don't switch stores.
It won't help. When a man holds the door open, don't block your behind as you walk
through. He's not looking.

You must rent a car. The bus won't take you there.
Palmetto bugs aren't as pleasant as they sound. And they fly.
Everyone eats watermelon, fried chicken, and has fish fries.
Not just old colored folk.

Ma'am and Sir do not indicate age.
When an old woman says, "Ain't that nice" more than twice
in a conversation, it's been passed time for you to stop talking.

The phrase "I'm full" doesn't exist when someone has cooked
and there's still food on your plate. If your fiance's father asks you
to pick "a few ears of corn," he means acres and he's testing your resolve.

The sky really is bluer here, but y'all have trouble seeing it.

We grow tobacco, football rivalries, and 150-year-old flags
to keep up morale. Visit historical museums, like the Calhoun house
in the middle of Clemson University plantation. Watch for silences.
Strom Thurmond never died.

In rifles we trust.
The blacks, the illegals, the gays, and the women are taking over,
but the South will rise again. Liberal professors are trying to brainwash our kids.
The nation never has been and never will be as moral
and God-fearing as the Palmetto State.

Worship is a two-day affair: Sunday at God's house and Saturday at Death Valley.
You are born a Republican (or Democrat), born a Christian (or Other),

and born a Tiger (or Gamecock). You can't help the way you are.
God is Republican, Christian, and Tiger.

Don't bring up the past. We're all ashamed of it.
We're all angry at our shame.
We protect the two as part of our heritage.

GOLDIE ATE GRITS

I don't know what porridge is. I've only tasted it through 19th century orphans who beg for more. But when Goldilocks is spread out on a bed with the Itis after having eaten breakfast, the bowls on my pages spill over with heavy breathing grits. And we all know that no self-respecting Southern den mother would put on a pot of grits without bacon, eggs, and the all-knowing buttermilk biscuit. Goldie ate all of that plus a glass of skim milk.

When she walked by the house on the "dangerous" side of town, she smelled the invitation before she saw the squat three-room house. Something in the allure of bacon that formed from the benediction of a plump life, something in eggs scrambled with yard vegetables and cheese, in the barefooted wildness of Lowery's seasoned grits, a red, brown, and black speckled sacrament, the blessing of butter wading in a golden pool of itself. And Lord have mercy, the biscuits raised and raised by the homespun magic of a warm kitchen, soft and golden on top, crisp and brown on the bottom, proof that there is in fact a Great God Almighty.

All this is how Goldie explained breaking into the house to her folks. Who knows why she broke the furniture? She probably plopped down on it. That comes from lack of home training. Her folks would never understand what she was doing in "that boy's" bed—the one that she never met because he was put in hiding as soon as his parents saw golden hair growing from his pillow.

Only the grits make it into the story, translated as porridge, poor orphan food, but grits never stand alone. On a Southern plate, no one food is condemned as unclean, cursed, demon-filled, and cast into the sea; or measured by its leaven and made more holy by the degree of its purity.

SECTION IV

CHANNELING JANIE

1

She and I were sitting on my bed and I was trying to convince her that I didn't hate her. Truly, I just didn't understand my grandmother and didn't think she understood me. How else could she be so intent on making me into a lady, when during my teens, I didn't want anything to do with the restrictions of ladyhood. This was well before I realized that one could attract more guys by not dressing in Daddy's clothes, not buying shoes (always Nikes) from the men's section, and not being dreadfully faithful to holey jeans (not the trendy kind) and a rusty brown ponytail (brown from being bleached by the sun).

We were on my bed talking about who-knows-what. I was such a subtle little girl, that I probably led with something like, "Grandma, I don't hate you," and then tried to explain how my love for her could be misinterpreted in consideration of my justifiably snotty attitude.

I remember this as an intimate moment for a couple of reasons. First, as the conversation meandered, we had a genuine laugh together—just the two of us. Who knew that my being pleasant would lead to us enjoying each other's company? We were talking about dancing. She probably saw that I was interested in it and asked me to show her

some moves. I showed her the Bankhead Bounce, even though it was a few years old at the time—and years for dance fads are like dog years.

It was something simple that she could try and she did. She yanked her shoulders up and bounced them as she leaned over. Then we laughed and she cracked a joke. Something like, “I almost bounced myself off the bed.” And we laughed again.

Another reason this moment stands out is because she told me that she used to Swing dance. I thought *You? Doing something fun?* She continued saying that her brothers used to toss her over their shoulders and around their stomachs. Me and Grandma had something in common.

Of course, this familial artifact means more to me now that I’m twenty-four than it did then, mostly because I’m a decade older, but also because Grandma Janie died my junior year in high school, so Swing dance has very recently become a sort of umbilical connection to the person my grandmother might have been.

2

I went to a Big Apple workshop a few months ago. The Big Apple dance is a fusion of African American folk dancing and Swing dancing. The workshop was lead by Lance Benishek, who danced with most of the original Big Apple Roxy dancers. He was there to teach us what he could about the Big Apple—history, steps, technique, names of moves, etc.

As the story goes, three white male students from USC were walking by The Big Apple Club, which was a black juke joint in my backyard—1138 Park St, Columbia, SC. I imagine that they heard energetic jazz and swing music, unison stomping, unison

shouting, laughter, and strange calls like Peel the Apple, Spank the Horsey, and Piggy Back. Whatever they heard enticed them to the door of the club, but y' know. South Carolina? 1937? Nuf said.

After some coaxing, the white students were allowed admission as long as they paid the twenty-five cent entry fee and remained in the balcony. This balcony is where Billy Spivey and his two friends first saw the dance that they later took to Myrtle Beach, then to the Roxy Theater in New York and they named the dance commemoratively after the club, The Big Apple.

Seeing the circle pattern of the Big Apple dance from a balcony must have been dynamic. This dance is an offshoot of Swing. All of the dance partners create a circle, turn up some music, everyone counts off in unison, "1, 2, 3, Swing Out!" and the dance begins with the basic step—the '20s Charleston.

One person, the caller, continues to shout the names of different moves: Bird Cage, Frankenstein, Swing High-Swing Low, Pump Handle. Meanwhile, as the moves are called, the dancers follow the instructions. It can be compared to the "Cha-Cha Slide," in the way that DJ Casper, the caller, yells moves and everyone follows. The most important differences are that the Big Apple is not performed in a line, but a circle with the participants facing each other, and there are more than fifty moves.

Billy Spivey and his friends would have seen right legs jabbing into the circle, then left legs stabbing out of the circle, then women stepping inwards so that two circles form and march in different directions, then the caller would holler, "Shine." At least one person would have been itching for this call and he or she would have jumped into the middle and freestyled, solo or with a partner.

At the Big Apple workshop, one man kept trying to play Brothaman to my Sistagirl. He, let's call him Homeboy, told me he was from DC (North East, I think), which made him "hard" by default, and he used to run with this Breakdancing crew. He re-emphasized that he was the only white guy in the crew.

"Oh, so that makes you real," I said.

He smiled. "Yeah. These white people can't dance." He gripped my arms and tried to Pop-Lock with me. Yes, we were still at the Big Apple session, partnered up, and he was trying to lead all kinds of body waves. Have I ever followed a body wave in Swing? Absolutely. Did I follow his? No. I just stood there.

Homeboy also said that my undergraduate university is in the ghetto. I don't know whether Bowie State's being an Historically Black University, it being situated in probably twenty miles of surrounding trees and suburbs, it consistently building a new facility every other year, or it being located in one of the richest black counties in the country tipped him off, but his information was incorrect.

We were learning a very uncommon form of Swing, which maybe only 10% of Swing dancers know, with Lance Benishek, a pioneer of the study and revival of The Big Apple. Homeboy turns out to be one of Mr. Lance's reference points. If Mr. Lance wanted a witness to verify something that happened at Big Apple workshops in other cities or needed someone to remember something, Homeboy was the go-to man.

While we were dancing later in the day, he paused and said, "You dance like a white girl."

Of the sixteen white dancers who introduced the Big Apple to the nation, at the Roxy Theater in New York, three were still living. Two of the three came to our workshop at USC—Francis Fetner and Jean Foreman. Ms. Francis was eighteen when she took the Big Apple to New York and Ms. Jean was only fourteen, but pretended to be eighteen. The ladies and Lance Benishek were sharing stories with a small group of twenty-, thirty-, and forty-somethings who sat on the floor craning their necks.

“What did your family say when you told them you wanted to go?”

“Oh, they couldn’t control me,” Ms. Jean said. She wore a mid-calf length, A-Line skirt and coordinating blouse and scarf. In my memory, the main color in her outfit was turquoise, but that could actually have been color that I associated with her personality. Her gray hair was cut in a bob and she wore big hater-blocker shades, which have become trendy but are apparently still prescribed for little old ladies with eye troubles. “It was The Depression,” she continued. “I had worked and saved up my money. They couldn’t say much.”

“Can you show us your signature moves?”

Ms. Jean jumped in again and started wiggling around. “Well, you have to try to move your whole body.” She pressed her fingers together in front of her stomach, one palm up, one down; moved her shoulders and torso up and down independently of each other; then did a sort of side step while keeping the rest of her body in motion.

I turned to Mr. Lance’s assistant. “How old is she?”

“Eighty-eight.”

Then all eyes fell on Ms. Francis. “I have arthritis, but it was something like...” and she side-stepped with her left hand on her stomach and her right hand in the air, forefinger waving, and added this isolationist ribcage circle.

I looked at the assistant again.

“Ninety-two,” she whispered.

“Did you dance at the Savoy?”

“Of course,” Ms. Jean tossed her hand. “You had to always be on the look out for better moves.”

She said, “Of course,” as if it made sense that white Carolinian dancers, newly famed at the Roxy Theater, would naturally dance at the Savoy with black Harlem dancers. These were strong, fascinating women, or maybe at the time, ignorant, idealistic girls, who in the 1930s, decided to pursue a career, to live without a chaperone in the biggest of the big cities, and to dance at the Savoy with colored dancers.

Is this part of the personality of Swing? Did my grandmother have the same determined, ambitious, daring, nearly reckless spirit as these ladies? Or is this the spirit of a dancer—who is more concerned with the expression of movement, than the impression of prejudices?

5

“Like a white girl.” What does that mean? Was he referring to a historical style or a current one? Maybe he expected me to incorporate Soulja Boy into “Jump, Jive, and Wail.” If I went to the Savoy or the Big Apple clubs in the 1930s, would I be laughed off of the floor? I first learned Swing, not in a club, but in a classroom. I wonder how much

of my version of Swing, Lindy Hop, Charleston, and the Shim Sham is “like a white girl.” In the arbitrariness of foot patterns, hand positions, and spins, and in the near absence of aerals, how much does my style, look like Grandma Janie’s? I imagine that for her watching me dance would be like looking into a warped mirror.

But not only as a dancer, as a black woman, I wanted to show this breakdancing thug, from the DC hoods but holds an MBA in finance, who Sistagirl really is. Do I have to be that girl, who is assigned to that box, today? Can I just be this girl, who carries around her own homemade box, which she likes to occasionally jump out of and very quickly back into; this girl who enjoys horseback riding, when she gets the rare occasion, and who has already named her future first horse Charisma; who, embracing the legacy of her namesake (Acts 8:27-28), wears a crown everyday that most people call an afro; who, if given the chance, would have tried to marry both Nat King Cole and Malcolm X; and who, in an effort to express a love of the art that God gives each person when He contours the body, Swing dances. When I’m so interesting, do I have to be Sistagirl?

Besides all of that, we were Swing dancing. How does he know what black Swing dancing (circa 1930s), which is also called Savoy Swing, looks like in comparison to the now more prevalent white Swing dancing (circa 1950s), dubbed Hollywood Swing? He’s likely seen the same Youtube videos that I have. There’s no way to recapture that. I can’t be held responsible for something I was never able to learn.

I didn’t tell him off. I just avoided him. When he rocked over to me rapping, “Cream on the inside. Clean on the outside,” I just made up an excuse to be somewhere else.

The next day, Richard Durlach taught us about the black Columbia dancers from whom the white Roxy dancers learned what is now called The Big Apple. While Billy Spivey, Jean Foreman, Francis Fetner and thirteen other white dancers performed to standing-room-only audiences in the second largest theater in the world, and were featured in newspapers, magazines, and radio shows around the country, were making \$50 a week during The Great Depression, were and hobnobbing with stars; some of the original black Big Apple dancers were touring as well. However, because Jim Crow wouldn't allow them to stay in southern hotels, they could only tour in places that were close enough for them to return home on the same day.

Despite the disparity, the spirit is still beautiful. Two sets of dancers—ambitious, determined, passionate—do whatever they have to do to share dance, by any means necessary, and achieve The American Dream. It conjures visions of posters that show some sublime image, like a lone person climbing a mountaintop, above a word like Dedication, Ambition, Perseverance, Commitment, Success. Then under the word is a motivational quote like, “What happens to a man is less significant than what happens within him,” or "Determination is often the first chapter in the book of excellence".

That day in workshop, while learning a little about the black side of The Big Apple dance, no one could account for the inventors of the dance, its age, its origins, or the people who danced at the Big Apple Club.

Except.

There were a few black dancers who were documented for touring the area. Most notably, several years ago, one of the dancers, Lucretia Cayruth, was able to give

interviews to *The State*, a Columbia based newspaper, about her experience with The Big Apple.

Determination, Inspiration, Motivation. Ms. Lucretia is one of the original black Big Apple dancers and her picture is in the August 24, 2003 issue of Columbia's *The State*—the Sunday edition. Maybe, in the end, after the dance craze dies and nearly everyone else dies, there is restitution.

In addition, two young black guys, who likely danced The Big Apple with Ms. Lucretia, toured the Carolinas with other young black dancers. They used farm equipment for transportation, according to dance historian, Richard Durlach.

Isn't that the spirit? Focus, Perseverance, Ingenuity. The reason we know that these guys were riding farm equipment to a location on their tour is because it was recorded in a newspaper snippet. It reads something like, "Two Columbia Negroes Killed in Truck Accident."

7

It seems that the pattern of this Big Apple trek is one of the patterns of The American Dream—the road commonly leads to and from an African American community. Where my knowledge of All-American music, dance, food, are concerned, they all started in Grandma Janie's house.

Part of each of the Roxy dancers' epic journeys included frequent trips to African American clubs, like the Big Apple and the Savoy, to learn whatever dances were happening in that community, then carry it to the white community at which point

someone sees it, organizes it into teachable steps, and makes it a product to sell their show.

Now, when people hear Swing Dancing, they generally don't imagine the originators of the dance; they think it's an old middle class white dance surrounded by signs that say, "NO COLOREDS ALLOWED." Isn't that the sign of a well-marketed product, when so many people believe the lie that it becomes an unconscious truth?

8

I saw Homeboy again, about a month later, at a dance in Atlanta. Without words, he offers me his hand. After dancing to a few bars of floating music, the first thing he says to me is, "For a black girl, you sure can't move your hips."

Does he want me to drop it like it's hot? I'm getting a little old for that, but I can still let it down like it's lukewarm. Either way, that's unorthodox for a Swing scene. I could bark and wind my fist in the air, like Arsenio Hall's Dog Pound, but that would be equally inappropriate.

Later the same night, I left the brightly lighted Swing ballroom and went in the small Blues room. A string of white Christmas bulbs draped around the perimeter provided the only light. The DJ played songs like "I'm Feeling Good," "Fever," and "Night Time is the Right Time."

To Blues dance, a guy puts his right hand on the girl's left shoulder blade or the between the shoulder blades and uses this section as a steering wheel to manipulate the girl's body. With this one hand, I saw guys leading body waves, hip wiggles, drops, rises, and all kinds of other bluesy moves.

Oh. That's what he was talking about. My face fell to the floor. Homeboy was trying to Blues with me.

9

Another white guy I met at the Big Apple workshop, Terell, came up to me really excited. We clicked because when we were next to each other, we'd both start giggling like school kids and that sparked the conversation.

He showed me news clippings that he'd torn out of his grandmother's scrapbook when she died. She wasn't a famous dancer, but she had been immortalized in print for winning Big Apple dance competitions. There was a large picture of her, bow in hair, light skirt flared; one of her close against her dance partner, smiling; one of the Big Apple club, with a caption describing it as a club for "darkies"; and others. Terell said his grandmother would tell stories about the Big Apple, but no one in his family really thought much about it. Still he became a Tap dancer. I wonder if Grandma Janie had told me stories about the clubs she used to dance in, would I have paid more attention to her?

Maybe.

If dancing was our strongest commonality, it's possible that I too, like the Roxy dancers, could have moved beyond my own constraints for the sake of dance and history.

I'm sure there is a birth certificate, marriage license, driver's license, and death certificate to document my grandmother. Since she was also a Registered Nurse, she would have had some kind of graduation certificate and license to practice. But that can't be all there was of her and for her.

I have some of her jewelry—dangly oval-shaped pearls on a silver, double-strand necklace with matching earrings. I'm scared to wear it because the day I do, it might get lost, broken, or stolen, as if I'm still at the age where I go to school with a fluorescent pink winter coat and *Ninja Turtles* lunchbox and return home with neither of them and no knowledge of what happened to them. (I really think there's a black hole in every elementary school.)

I keep the jewelry because it's hers and because it represents the part of her that I never knew and that wasn't documented. It tells me that she was a pretty girl who liked to be pretty and had good taste in jewelry. At the very least, we now have that in common.

I learned my grandmother's dance from people, who learned it from people, who learned it from people, who learned it from my grandmother and, instead of feeling disenfranchised, I'm just disappointed that Grandma Janie never taught me herself and that I didn't have the foresight to ask.

When I finish repairing my flux capacitor, I'm going to see firsthand what Swing dancing for the Burnies, my grandma's family, in New Bern, NC, looked like. It wouldn't be Hollywood Swing or Savoy Swing. It wouldn't be a product that can be marketed to people. It would be new, always new, all the time, like jazz. Burnie Swing.

It's amazing that even though the Jazzy moves in The Big Apple had spread through other communities, they were still recycled through my community. At the Big Apple workshop, we learned the Susie Q, which to me was just the Heel Toe—instead of twisting the same heel on the floor repetitively, my generation alternates heels; we learned Fall off the Log, which I'm pretty sure showed up in the movie *House Party*—where Swing dancers kicked one leg then tipped to the opposite direction of the leg, Kid

and Play pulled the knee into the chest twice then then jumped in the opposite direction; we learned Pecking, which is just bopping the head; the Itch, which I'd swear is the father of the Robot and the grandfather of Locking; and this move (I forgot the name) that I promise you I saw Rudy and Theo Huxtable doing on the Cosby Show intro. To my knowledge, no other large community recycled the Susie Q or any of those other moves into current dance styles. My community did. I'm pretty sure that Kid and Play weren't well versed in Jazz dance: they just saw a move somewhere and tweaked it. Not a warped mirror, but wholly new take on a very old feeling.

Lucretia Cayruth the last living black Big Apple dancer that we know of, told *The State* newspaper in the nineties, "The music would just take you, like it does in church...All the children today are doing the Big Apple. They just don't know it." If this theory holds, I should be able to look at the dancing in my community now and see similarities to the dancing in the '30s and '40s. I should be able to look at my own dancing and see a modified version of my grandmother.

She had long, jet black, Indian hair (Tuscaroara Tribe) only stood about 5 feet tall, deep dark clay-red skin, and long nails. She was the knee-baby of eleven children, which means she was the second youngest and easy to lift into the air. Her shoes would have been too small for her feet. Wearing too-small shoes growing up damaged her toes as an adult. Other kids would have probably been wearing hand-me-downs clothes, but Grandma would have pinched pennies to afford enough fabric to make herself a nice dress. Her older brothers would have escorted her to dances and monitored who she danced with. And when she was ready to shine, she and one of her brothers would have taken center stage and performed aerials they'd practiced all week—tossed over his

shoulders, swung around his neck, flipped over his arm, spun around his waist, pulled under his legs, flying into the air—for a packed crowd who loved them.

SECTION V

POST RACIAL

I thought we might really be a post-racial generation
when I heard two white girls greet each other
“What’s up, my nig!”

Then one of them sssh-ed the other
and nodded in my direction, as if to say,
“There’s one right there.”

1955
For Mr. Dunbar

many of us had been for centuries
toting long, cold, heavy smiles
like showcase windows
that belied our souls
and our meditations,
but that little Till boy
gave us the chance
to frown
to glare
together
on tv.

SURVIVAL SKILLS OF THE SAVANNAH
for Trayvon Martin

We are an antelope people.
We prick our ears to Serengeti whispers
down MLK Ave,
one tail flicks a white warning
that sets a leaping stampede in motion
No questions.
No hesitation.
There are incisors in the bush!
or there might be.

We don't wander between the cliffs of Are and Might.
We don't ponder existential questions
about the shortness of black male life,
the sniping of daddies and big bruhs.
The female blocks the front door,
lowers her antlers, orders him to run.
To the shooter she's a hostage,
not a momma or sister.
Target the buck.
The harem will find a new one tomorrow.

They import us
still. They find us majestic
and irresistible. A big game
hunt soothes cravings for the crack
of bullet on bone.

Afterward they caress his girth
for cameras, hang his lack jaws
and marbled eyes over mantels,
precious fingers and manhood in jars
leave the rest in the field,
surrounded by an electric fence.

Trayvon didn't run.
He was bolder or dumber than the rest of us,
turned and shouted straight-backed questions
like he had a right to
his existence.

If you didn't do anything
they always ask
why did you run?

If you didn't want anything,
why did you chase?

We run
because you have taught us
it is the best way
to survive.

THE DISTRICT

When we picture D.C., we start with the government.
We still aren't certain they had nothing better to do.

Then we cycle in the flow of traffic, all grid-laid one-way, until we find ourselves
in Alexandria or Waldorf and can finally make a U-turn.

We walk roads that start before Frederick Douglass's
Cedar Hill and lead down U St. to the New Negro.
(And who else would have crafted the Oval Office crown molding?)

Howard students talk theology over Chinese carryout,
fried wings with mumbo sauce. A poet called Slangston Spews spits fire

into a mic at Busboys and Poets. Duke Ellington High students perch outside
on their instruments, wait for a chance to sneak into BarNone uncarded.

Streets glisten in those frames like spit-shined patent leather,
bounce red and blue lights like window-front Christmases.

These are images you won't see in the Visitor's Center.

Over in Lincoln Heights, a father laughs, records his son on his iphone
chain-linking curse words with foreign fluency, smiles, middle finger to the sky.

Down by Wheatley Rec., mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother live under one roof.
The eldest is forty-seven. Their hair fresher than Down South air.

Four guys in camouflage jackets and Tims huddle on a grandmother's stoop
from when she gets off at night to when she leaves in the morning.
Two spent hours as boys locked in a dark closet or bathroom for messing up a high.

Street signs cycle in one-way hand-offs from the 80s when crack hit
to now. Don't judge our recovery.

Those decades blew like a hurricane.
Who can tell if a 'cane sniffs or blows but the debris?

No wonder when police come through, silence prevails.
It doesn't take much to link the uniform in your front yard

(if you have a front yard) with the mansion in your back
(if you have a back yard).

We still aren't certain they had nothing better to do
but cycle the flow of traffic all one way.

LIKE GODS

like men who live like gods
like this mortar and brick are all a/part
of a matrix or some collaps/ible dream
they fold into their pockets
that keeps them be/lieving
that they can drive 90 mph without a seatbelt
inches from the halo of taillights a/head,
suck comfort from a cancer stick,
strut a/cross the street and dare a car not to yield,
hang at the baddest club at 3 a.m.
because the music is still hot
and the guys are still cute,
suck the ambrosia out of him because he looks clean
and it just might be the best sex ever
like they buy their lives in six-packs
and keep tab-bracelets to remind them what numb/er they're on
like when they stand up, they cast shadows on sky/scrapers
they pasted together
like it's all a façade and they're looking beyond the eighth
dimension to find the real
like gods who die like men

LOST BOYS

I'm going to tell you a story that never happened. Once upon a time, a girl died graceful as a clap in the night. She floated off the porch to pavement as heavy as a ton of feathers. Or maybe she didn't die right away. She lingered, the back of her hand on her forehead, in a hospital bed, with parents and school friends around her. Or she was a he, was he? He bounded off of the porch like a midfielder, his whole back smeared with dirt. But there was no dirt, only pavement, scraping tender skin until it frothed up rosy red. He caught it, of course. Hands curled to his stomach around the tiny pellet. Once upon a time, a boy died fragrant as incense. He smelled sickly sweet on the operating table, held onto his life thread with two fists. A team of masks leaned their noses close to his abdomen and took in the fresh baby smell, the last whiff before the body turned bitter-foul and vengeful.

When the light-door shuts and a boy is left in the dark, alone, he gets scared. He won't admit it, but it's true. Once, there was a lost boy in the abyss—the space of nothingness in the afterlife. It wasn't cold, no wind, nothing else was there, but he felt chilly. Or maybe he was still in the O.R. watching people give up on his body, push things back inside, cover their noses, and stitch a person back together. He waited like he thought he was supposed to. He waited until after the cleaning crew erased his blood from the room, until the next surgery was about to start, about as long as a boy could wait. Then he wandered the halls looking for some adult who recognized him and who he recognized. While I'm telling you a story that never happened, I should tell you that in truth, he was looking for mischief. He realized that no one could see him and wanted to drop someone's pants and watch them panic, maybe even fall. Death will be a great adventure, he thought and he dropped pants, knocked urine cups, pulled moustaches, hid bedpans.

Once upon a time, a drug deal went wrong. Wasn't nothing but a little weed and two little weed boys, one white and one black, and one gun. Wasn't nothing but a little pride and a mistake, they both would say, if they could say. But one doesn't quite remember what happened now. He was busy chasing no one in particular up and down the hallway of Mercy West until he ran into another lost boy, Pete, who didn't seem to be so lost.

This is not a story with a climax and dénouement. This is a dream that starts with you falling and ends with you kicking yourself awake. I have a headache from telling it. In fact, I can't tell too much more, because lost boys fly like Shalimar. They stretch Alvin Ailey, holy ghost arms and lift. That lost boy done gone. He in the wind now trying to make dying a real adventure. These boys come from a place where there are no old men and flight is mostly hereditary. Those men caught the wind a long time ago.

Once upon a time, I told a story that hid another story, the kind of story that you'd rip out of a book because it makes your skin sticky. But the sound of that tear would remind you of that graceful clap in the night. Then you'd have to figure out what to do with that page.

dementia

for granddad summers got shorter every year
playing chess in the eye of the storm

yard work at the blush of dawn
no longer mandatory, still unshakable

shirt buttons shoes and bathrooms
tasks for his mind, but habit still drummed

*met buddy at a revival.
said I'm gonna marry you*

hiding all of his cologne bottles
avoiding baths and church

suspicious of white folk
and doctors
and nighttime front door knocks

one hole blotched his smile
a mysteriously missing tooth
one crooked finger, his hands
a break that God and nature healed

*her little brother had to watch us
gave him some ice cream
snuck off to the Justice of the Peace*

mistook his son for a suitor and fought him
like his life depended
mistook his son for his father and obeyed him
like his soul depended

hazy distant eyes he saw more dead than living
followed teasing silent spirits into woods,
followed his footsteps back

*my wages come up short
buddy figure the numbers and tol' him he was wrong.
that white man ain't short me no more. He ain't short me No more.*

in a moment of lucidity granddad called
a family meeting

“i’m tired”
“go’ on to be with the lord”
“blow my brains out”

Solution: nursing home

footsteps echo through the thick scent of ammonia and illness
bed restraints strap his arms legs and chest
the movement returns
pale devil returns
helplessness returns

white walls white floors white sheets
outside the window another brick wall
strangers knock and swarm at night

floating names faces strangers
enter and possess his room white men
enter and possess white women
enter and

when grandma visits
“buddy”—cause they were friends—
“buddy these *women* keep trying to touch me
i tell them i’m married but they keep trying
to *touch* me”

trapped in cement and asphalt
he can’t follow his footsteps back

despite this grandma said
“those last days were better than the first
we became one
that storm made us one”

THE BARACK EFFECT

I told this schoolboy he was smart.
He didn't blush
and rub the compliment all over himself
like Vicks Vaporub.
He just said, "I know"
and left it at that.

SECTION VI

WHILE CONSIDERING THE LIGHTENING OF NINA SIMONE FOR THE BIG SCREEN
for Aunt Sarah

I am black
helpless as a widow
fragile as a box
open as a book
grounded as a mamba
common as a tuesday
loud as a market
cloned as a sheep
servile as a knight
godless as a panther
indefensible as an eye

I FIRST BECAME BLACK WHEN I WAS FOUR

in pre-school, by the row of miniature toilets.
My best friends, Ashley and Michelle, taught me
“Do I Diddy” and “Wild Thing.”
I sang them like anthems
until my parents retired them.

Ashley showed us how to *finch* kiss,
told us if we didn’t lick her tongue,
she wouldn’t be our friend anymore.
The first time, we poked tongues in intimate
taunts and touched tips.
Mom taught me to be brave against threats.
The second time, I twisted
Ashley’s arm behind her back until she cried.
Dad taught me that.

One morning, after Ashley shed
her beauty mask like skin,
she taught us Indian burns.
She turned Michelle’s arm hot engine red,
then Michelle did Ashley,
then they tried me—two sets of hands
on the same arm
which refused to turn.
Why could they change colors?
It was because I was black,
Ashley said. I was even blacker
than the black person her *diddy* knew.

With sopping wet arms,
I watched them give themselves
bright fuschia blooms,
tempted to pull off that top layer
with my baby teeth.
See! I turn red, too!

Mom showed me in the 64-count
Crayola box that I was Raw UMBER
and she was Maize.
Dad told me I wasn’t allowed
to make hickeys anyhow.

It wasn’t until Bible class

that I saw Crayola didn't put our colors,
in my new box. I couldn't show my friends

Raw Umber.

The teacher taught us
God is good and white is good.

Black is bad
and the devil is black.

I wasn't big enough to twist her arm behind her back.

MICHAEL, 1992

Aside from Jesus, I want to look like
Michael Jackson. His always-flowing hair,
wet-shiny black. Skipping through the prayer
of fainting fans. Long, lean, lithe, movements strike
perfect angles. Pure skin: not black or white.
He is beautiful. Rose-lipped and doe-eyed.
Scream, scat, coo, create first magic moon glide
and pop. Multitudes quickly fall for Mike.
Performing for the couch and T.V. set
I hang a t-shirt by the stretched neckline
on my shrubby, bush hair, feel it swing down
my back and dream it is silky Mike-wet,
I am angular, perfectly divine.
I am pure-skinned and praised, not tree-bark brown.

WHITE GIRL

They laugh.

White Girl

Tiny murders
from tiny daggers
fly
between the words.

White

beads click time
at the ends
of my plaits
between the claps
of rope on pavement.

White

ash smudges the webs
between my fingers
that Vaseline missed.

Girl

unaware that colors
could act
and talk
I act
and talk

White

girls hold their forearms
over mine.
I hate how they spit
through tucked lips
and grinning teeth
Bl-a-cK.
The word cracks
like hot grease.
Not like home
where it tumbles

to a soft stop
like chewing fresh rolls.

White

boy once sent me home
with the question,
that question,
“Daddy, what’s a nigger?”

White

Girl

they call me.
Along their hairline
runs burns
from the hot comb
and no lye relaxer.

Another message comes
for the light-skinned girl
with the good hair.
“Twan say wha’sup.”

Girl

unaware that colors
could act
and talk,
I act
and talk

White

Girl

They laugh.
Tiny red lines
show where tiny cuts
bleed on their lips,
but pieces of me
fall.
chunks of my grandmothers’
“Be the smartest kid in your class”
chunks of my grandfathers’

“Do your best, baby”

chunks of my dad’s

“Act like you been in public before”

chunks of my mom’s

“Behave like a young lady”

fall

cut to the ground by

“She think she too good”

by

“Oreo”

by

“White

Girl”

aware that colors

could act

and talk,

I begin

to act

and talk

Black.

DEAR BLACK BARBIE

I made you fuck my white Barbie
even though I knew you didn't want to.
There were no whips or chains,
this was a different kind of plantation fantasy.
I didn't have a Ken doll, so I made you the man.
Not knowing what fucking looked like
I just rubbed you against each other and made you kiss.

I kept you barefoot like you came
three worlds later or fifty years earlier,
but I had Nicki Minaj dreams for us:
bleached brown skin, long stringy yellow hair,
God-blue eyes, lips pink as a Cadillac. Only then
could you wear the best dress and the one pair of pumps.

Black Barbie, is that your real name?
Are those your natural-born arms and hips?
You got Indian in your blood?
Can you unzip that smile?
Did Mattel give you vocal cords? give you a way to hum
No! even if your lips couldn't shape it?

You didn't have a Gerri Curl Jerry to protect you
may not have even wanted one.
You wanted to lie under the bed with the forgotten stuff
a cushion to cross your legs over
for Buddah meditations, some baggy TLC jeans
and a waterfall to call your own,
to dance a bent-knee dance with a prophet,
to gossip with a sister.

My dear black Barbie, maybe you needed a grandma
to tell you things are better than they used to be.
There was a time when you didn't exist at all.

HEIRLOOMS

Same as holiday cakes on overcrowded
homemade tables that never wobble,
same as the coldest well-water lemonade
in the rack of dog days,
same as barn raisin,
pocket watch on a Wednesday wearin,
pull an engine apart and put it right back men,
same as gin rummy playin, tobacco chewin,
don't jump near this stove,
and stay quiet when grown folks talkin women.

This is life handed down, brown

like a close cross stitch.
Careful brown eyes measure window-front
fashions, cut and piece patterns,
from scrap fabrics or cotton sacks
or old dresses or pillowcases
patient fingers piece feel-good dresses
tailor-made for one somebody
who could tip around week-in and week-out
like the sweat down the gully of her back
and pressed tight between her thighs
were heirloomed diamonds.

This is life handed down, brown to women

like her. She was not yet a hard singing woman
young, soft swinging in her small stitched self made
dress, little brother chaperone in tow,
sweet calloused feet tippin through the sinner-
bluesy rifts on the front porch phonograph
at the colored general store.

Same walk as her mother and grandmother before her
say old turning head men
long after she wafts that purpley music
behind her to the road.
Young turning head men don't yet
understand, what greybeards know
about fatherhood, brotherhood, husbandhood,
manhood.

Soon, just as her mother and grandmother
before her, one young turning head man
takes her for a wagon ride after church
and before Sunday dinner.
Just like those graybeards before him,
this young turning head man lays his hat on the seat
between them, compliments her self-made
dress and big brown eyes, praises
God for the warm crisp harvest season.
He uncovers, shivering and naked
in his calloused hands, dreams
of buying a tract of land
of raising a house and farm on it.

This young, not yet hard singing woman,
notices the strength in those rein-holding hands
and the clarity in his eyes.
She admires how his lips curve
to hold her name,
but she will not say a thing
other than to shush her little brother chaperone.

This is life handed down, brown and quiet.

Just before they circle back to the house,
there is a shout from another wagon.
The young turning head man will pull aside
to let pass an impatient oncoming team.

A salmon pink gentleman
in double-breasted overcoat waves
over the young, not yet hard singing, woman
and commands the turning head man
not to look or leave.

This salmon pink gentlemen
in his overcoat and negro spit-shined shoes
teaches this woman, like her mother
and grandmother before her,
something she never knew bodies could do.
Blood moistens the friction
and disgusts him when he sees it on his pants.

They emerge from the carriage.
The salmon pink gentleman
with sweat-matted hair and undisturbed clothing.

The young brown woman with bruised
cheek and back-side.
She will try to walk without waddling.
Her diamond-lined thighs will try
to hold back the blood.
She, like her mother and grandmother before her,
will become a hard singing woman.

The young turning head man does not see
any of this. As he watches his shadow
lean in the sun, he tries to unhear
that pink gentleman's slaps and curses,
his heavy wheezing grunts,
that final groan and *get out niggerbitch*.
He tries to unhear her begging
and Jesus calling and the jagged questions
of the little brother chaperone at his side.
He is careful not to consider
the torn dress of the young woman climbing
into his wagon or her and the pink man
standing back-to-front
like breeding horses.

This is his first time too
understanding why greybeards
marinate in purpley sounds,
why the music needs
to be bluesy, sinned, and rifted,
what it means to be a real man
with a real woman
and real brown.

Same as overcrowded
homemade tables,
the coldest well-water,
the stay quiet when grown folks talkin
this is life handed down, brown.

THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW BEFORE YOU LEAVE THE HOUSE
for colored girls

There will be bras and ballet slippers that claim to be your color—Nude.
You will slip on the fake Dollar Store nails with the light tan fingertips and red nail
polish
and still feel pretty.

The language you speak in your house is the indefinable language of God.
In school, you will be taught how to speak to humans.

When you sit on the padded stool between the knees of your mother, sister, auntie
and they oil the dense nerve endings in your scalp and stretch your hair into patterns,
you are doing something that heaven has no word for.

We women have forgotten how to need each other.
We lose ourselves outside of ourselves and expect a stranger to bring us home.
Only once in your life can another human be your house.

Not every word should be spoken aloud
or thought quietly. You're beauty is the artfulness of your mouth.

All you *have* to do is stay black and pay your taxes.
The rest is up to you.

Be careful with that hot comb.
You'll destroy the house trying to burn the fireplace.

Sometimes we pray with practiced inflection.
Sometimes we pray one-word prayers, like Give, Grow, Learn, Adapt, Love, Teach, Live.
We are always strongest when we pray with our feet.

WHAT I SHOULD HAVE TOLD THE OLD WOMAN IN SUMTER WHO MISTOOK ME FOR THAT
ROBINSON GIRL
After L. Lamar Wilson

First Lady, Madam First Lady, Mrs. President
I float by that cracked voice on the purple and black fog of imagination,
backed by strobe lights and a deejay. Earlier, the guy with me
buried his face in my 'fro; parted the waves with his nose
like he was whispering a secret to my tresses; squeezed me
and we danced all night. Never been loved like that.

We drove up to Sumter because they make the best eggs,
he said. Do you know her, he asks, and the beige IHOP forms around me,
bright daylight outside and an Easter-dressed family in a corner booth.

Mom, that's not Michelle Obama,
a lady grabs the outstretched hand of a gray-haired woman with child eyes.
Those thick knuckled fingers were David's reaching to an Italian God.
I want to sit with her and giggle about the name Rooty Tooty Fresh and Fruity,
share my hash browns, ask You want ketchup, Mama? but the family's eyes say
that there is no such thing as tasteful cleavage and thigh.

Here I am with a man no one would ever mistake for Obama
or Jesus and a woman is wrestling with her own angel, to send this name
Michelle up to me. When I grab that hand, something spills out of her. And she weeps.
I rise strengthened by their stares, proud of my lips, my arms,
my ostentatious hips, a crown that many people mistake for hair,
all of me entwined like roots.
My guy pulls me away.

But what I should have told the old woman in IHOP
who mistook me for that Robinson girl is: You are the one you seek.
You bear the spine that curves under the fruit of the world.
You have children who pull on you when they want.
How many Delilahs have you hugged with those brass arms?

I have trained myself to walk
like a commoner so that someone will call me beautiful
and mean it. My tongue is so confused that only you understand me.
I've jumped into a fiery furnace behind some man
and only I can save me like I want to be saved,
but I don't know how.