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**What We Say: Exploring Well-Versed Messaging in the
Tradition of Black Americana**

Lyrical – Symbolic – Literary – Cloth
Relatable, Practiced, Learned

by

Brenda Bell Brown

A creative thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Fine Arts in Writing

Hamline University
Saint Paul, Minnesota
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Committee Chair: Mary Francois Rockcastle

Primary Advisor: Katrina Vandenberg


Outside Reader: Deborah Keenan


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“Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry”)

When my young family moved to Minnesota in the early 90s, we moved here in the wake of the Rodney King beating at the hands of the Los Angeles, California police officers and the riots that ravaged the streets. That incident was not unlike the riots that took place in my hometown of Memphis, Tennessee, that laid my home to waste in the wake of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination. Parallels—along the line of incidence, people, and place—revealed themselves time and again as we settled in to this place that both my husband I agreed, to our shared recollection, had been just a mere reference in a Walter Cronkite newscast all our lives.

Heretofore, we'd only been mindful of the Minnesota the news soundbite introduced as the "Heartland of America's Bread Basket." After having lived in Minnesota for over twenty years—longer time lived here than in Tennessee and South Carolina, the land of me and my then-husband's respective births—we now call Minnesota "home." Our laundry list for choosing this place to re-locate our family and raise our two children in the promised amenities of "good jobs, good educations" was not dissimilar to the dreams of our respective families: his moved from down-home South Carolina to pristine California; mine, from rural Kentucky to big-city Memphis. We were merely following the timeworn tradition of power-positioning to ensure a better future for our family as did our families before us, as did our enslaved ancestors who ran from slave to free.

With that in mind, one should not just pay attention to "What We Say" but also acknowledge "what we do." Understand that I am, conversely, referencing the singular and the possessive "We" as a point of context. By doing so, I am connecting us all in the same universe, regardless of the socio-historical realities that tend to disassociate us. Such a notion makes this work as much a part of your sensibility as it does, on so many personal and public levels, mine.

One day while shopping at the Eagan (MN) Target, I pushed my loaded cart to the checkout area, mentally debating whether tired me should go back into the stacks to get that one “got-to-have” item that I had forgotten in my rush to get home and meet my daughter’s school bus, relieve my baby-sitting cousin, start the family dinner, etc. I was at the critical, decisive point when I saw him: a male toddler, sitting on top of some items at the end of one of the checkout islands. He held in his hand the very item that was on my mind. He held out the item to me. Over half a million Target Team Members, no doubt a hundred-strong in this one store, yet it was this child who proffered the one-in-a-zillion item that I wanted that day in his little hand. I thanked him without fanfare, without slowing my flow, went to check out and drove home.

We are One; and that’s the way I feel.

Dedicated to the Keepers of the Flame.

I honor those who have gone on to Glory:

Odell Horton, Mary Bell Jones Horton, Bennie Frank Bell, Sr., “Tip” Bell,

Bennie Frank Bell, Jr., Mary Barbara Horton Bell Saunders,

Phyllis Kathryn Bell Jubert,

George Houston Bass, Dr. Rowena Stewart,

Aasim

and those I remember, not by name,

but with every beat of my most grateful heart.

This is an abbreviated version of what I learned, by way of your instruction.

More is on the way.

Much love and high appreciation for the phone lectures and call meetings administered by

the most learned women I know,

Ramona “Watermelon Lady” Bass-Kolobe and Kim Hines.

Their words kept me sane and motivated.

With all the honor, admiration, and humility that I can muster, many thanks to

Primary Advisor *Katrina Vandenberg*, Outside Reader Professor *Deborah Keenan*

and Committee Chair *Mary Francois Rockcastle*.

To the loves of my life—*Naima Taaaj Ajmal* and *Malik Babatunde*—

Forward.

Much appreciation to the professors of my Hamline University experience.

Fond memories of you all.

Thank you for your parting gift of poetry by James Weldon Johnson; your imploration
for more teachers who love to write and teach writing; your smile upon
receiving an out-of-print copy of Sinclair Lewis' *Kingsblood Royal*.

Thank you for not shushing me when I went over time with my comments.

Thank you for reading my heart and my soul, for delivering
on a curricular promise written in obsidian and lapis lazuli blue.

Thank you for giving me encouragement and your time,
your wisdom and cautions, your belief in my
ability to figure out my conundrums and make it to the end of the page.

Thank you for not smirking at my literary sea legs
as I attempted to tread on subjects that made me
tremble at the thought of sharing them with the world.

Thank you for working with me on this journey,
for strengthening my strong right to the sword.

What We Say: Exploring Well-Versed Messaging in the Tradition of Black Americana

Lyrical – Symbolic – Literary – Cloth
Relatable, Practiced, Learned



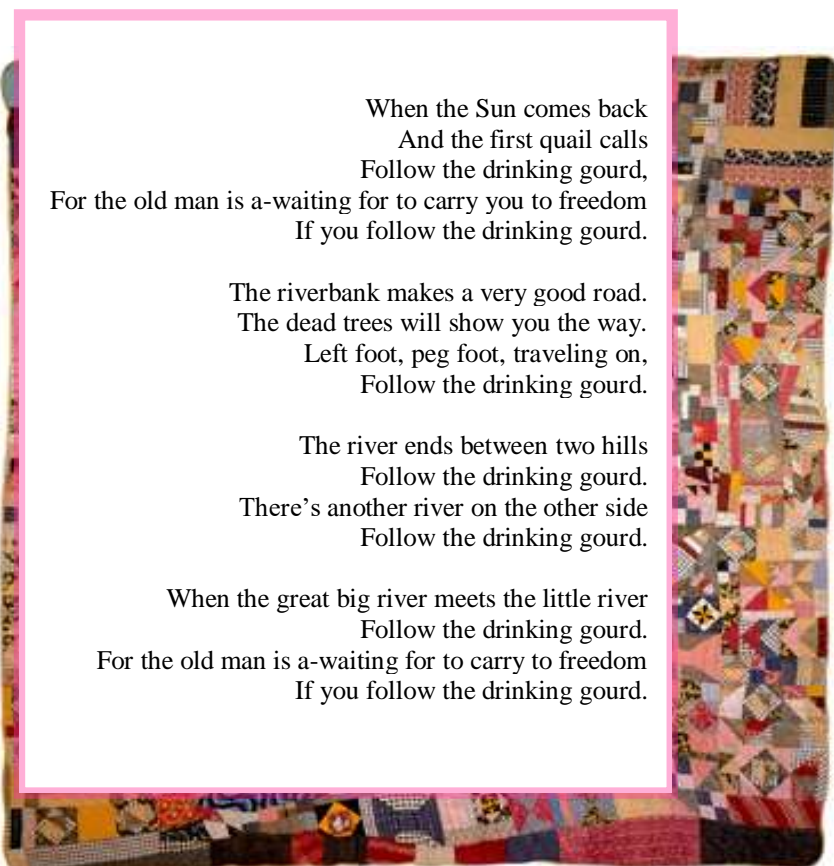
The tactics that Black Americans used to survive slavery were uniquely forged forms of language, mannerisms, accoutrement, and traditions. These unique cultural methodologies were forged during do-or-die situations critical to a people’s existence. During the 17th and 18th centuries, enslaved Africans in America used their ability to be elusive and forged a language in this foreign existence with only a cerebral, sensory memory of their homeland Africa to prompt sense-memory inflections of pronunciation and meaning true to their native ways-of-being. They learned to talk to each other in ways that were “made up” but inherently true to a shared sensibility.

What We Say (and sing)

They knew what they meant. It was to the slave's benefit that the slaver dismissed the conversation as gibberish. *They couldn't handle the truth;* the double entendres of songs sung during slave worship; their double use—used during times of religious ease as “worship and praise” juxtaposed to the literal use of a song lyric that spelled out different aspects of escape from slavery. Songs like “Follow the Drinking Gourd” that was lyrically referenced during times of peril and flight while moving a body from slave to free.

English professor James Kelley, in the *Journal of Popular Culture*, contends that there were too many directional inconsistencies as confirmed by the interpolation of the mapping website “NASA Quest” to give credence to the use of this song as a literal, lyrical map to freedom. The constellation, seasonal and land mass references just did not align. According to Kelly, it is intellectually irresponsible to use this song as a valid source, an irrefutable example of coded messaging in the music of Black America. According to Kelley, it just does not make scientific sense, as the referenced constellations are known to align.

Yet, as also noted by the doubting Kelley in the article title “Song, Story, or History: Resisting Claims of a Coded Message in the African American Spiritual “Follow the Drinking Gourd,” if all the permutations of the song code



When the Sun comes back
And the first quail calls
Follow the drinking gourd,
For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.

The riverbank makes a very good road.
The dead trees will show you the way.
Left foot, peg foot, traveling on,
Follow the drinking gourd.

The river ends between two hills
Follow the drinking gourd.
There's another river on the other side
Follow the drinking gourd.

When the great big river meets the little river
Follow the drinking gourd.
For the old man is a-waiting for to carry to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.

were easily tracked and cracked, then just how effectively secret would it be? Furthermore, it is reasonable to say that, for all the escaping slaves whose very lives depended on the code—over one hundred thousand Africans of approximately four hundred thousand Africans who came to America as slaves—the lyrics proved highly effective as a celestial map to freedom.

Smartly, the undisputed music master, Ray Charles, was known to say when asked what he was about to play, “I’mmo make it do what it do.” I interpret Charles’ creative use of extension on his contraction as one that comes directly from the root of a Southern tradition, being that Charles was born and raised in Georgia. Charles refers to the music and the piano as if they were life forms. In most aspects of African art, personification of the inanimate is used to point out the elements of life that flow in everything. Charles, as musician is Master and chief surveyor of his domain: as his music entertains, it also transforms. I hold forth Charles and his art as a prime example of tradition at work, with all its African retentions.

To discern true intent of what is being said, to get to the heart of the dialectal speaker’s words, requires a modicum of respect for the speaker by the listener. To put it more succinctly, to regard the speaker as inferior based on a use of non-standard patterns of speech is indicative of a low regard for non-standard speakers i.e. non-white speakers in a pluralistic world. No wonder “pluralism is invisible as a third option” for communicative exchange in today’s classrooms, contends Rebecca Moore Howard in her article “The Great Wall of African American Vernacular English in the American College Classroom” as students are relegated to fitting

“commentary into the framework of a putatively
benevolent, teacher-directed code-switching.”

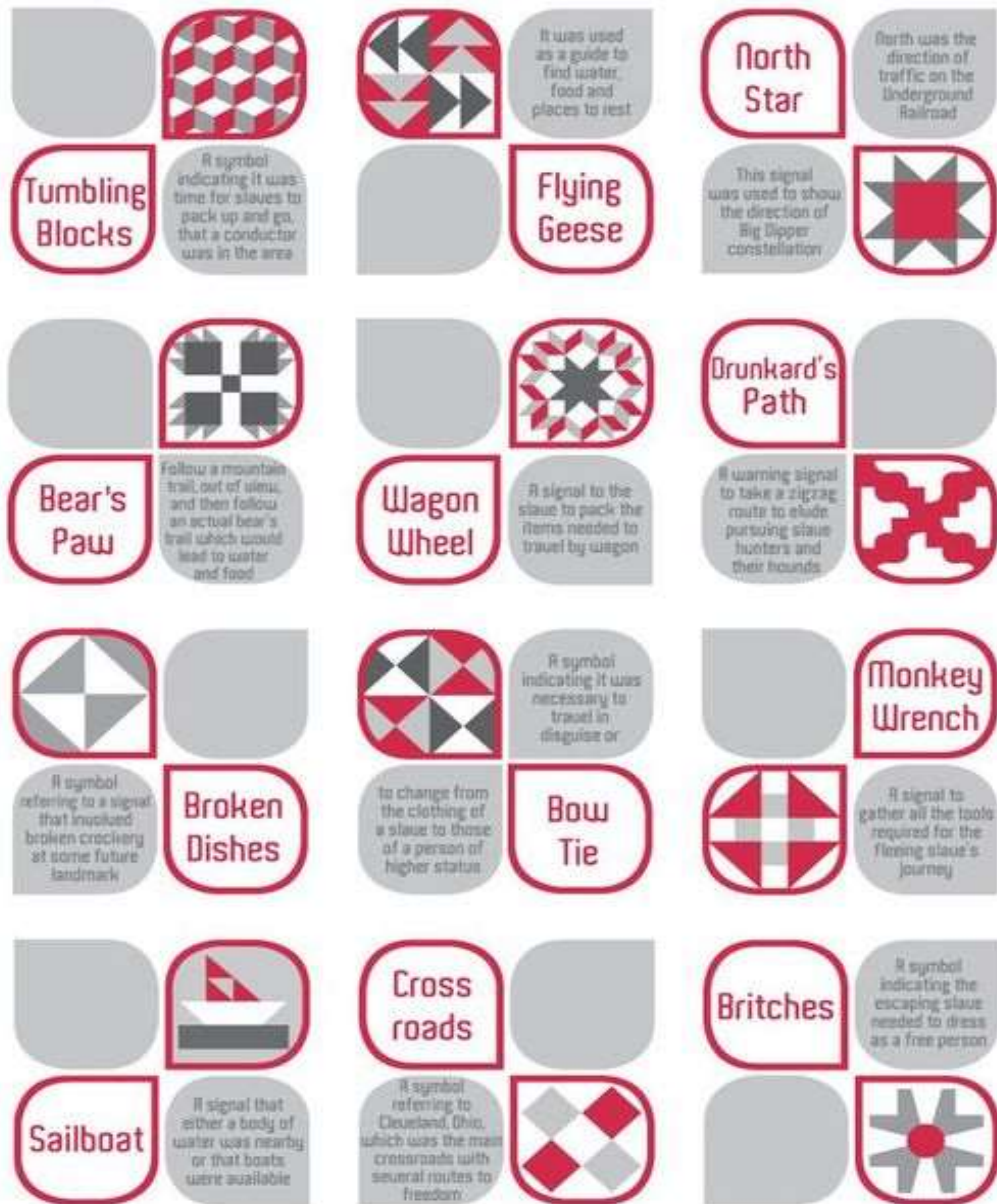
How does one develop and maintain cultural pride in the public domain if your language, one of the most outward expressions of your cultural being, is “represented in binary opposition to eradicationism?”

Perhaps this dismissive attitude towards the improper speech of enslaved Africans worked in their favor. The more their conversations were dismissed as inane prattle, the better their double-speak worked to the slave’s favor. I imagine, in some instances, they dared to plot in public thanks to the dismissive attitude of their supposed superiors. A little over a century removed from slavery, the reconnection of a language hidden within a language has been popularized by Black, soul music singing group like the O’Jays who are known to sing about the “Message in Our Music,” as the language of survival.

Seen, Yet Unseen

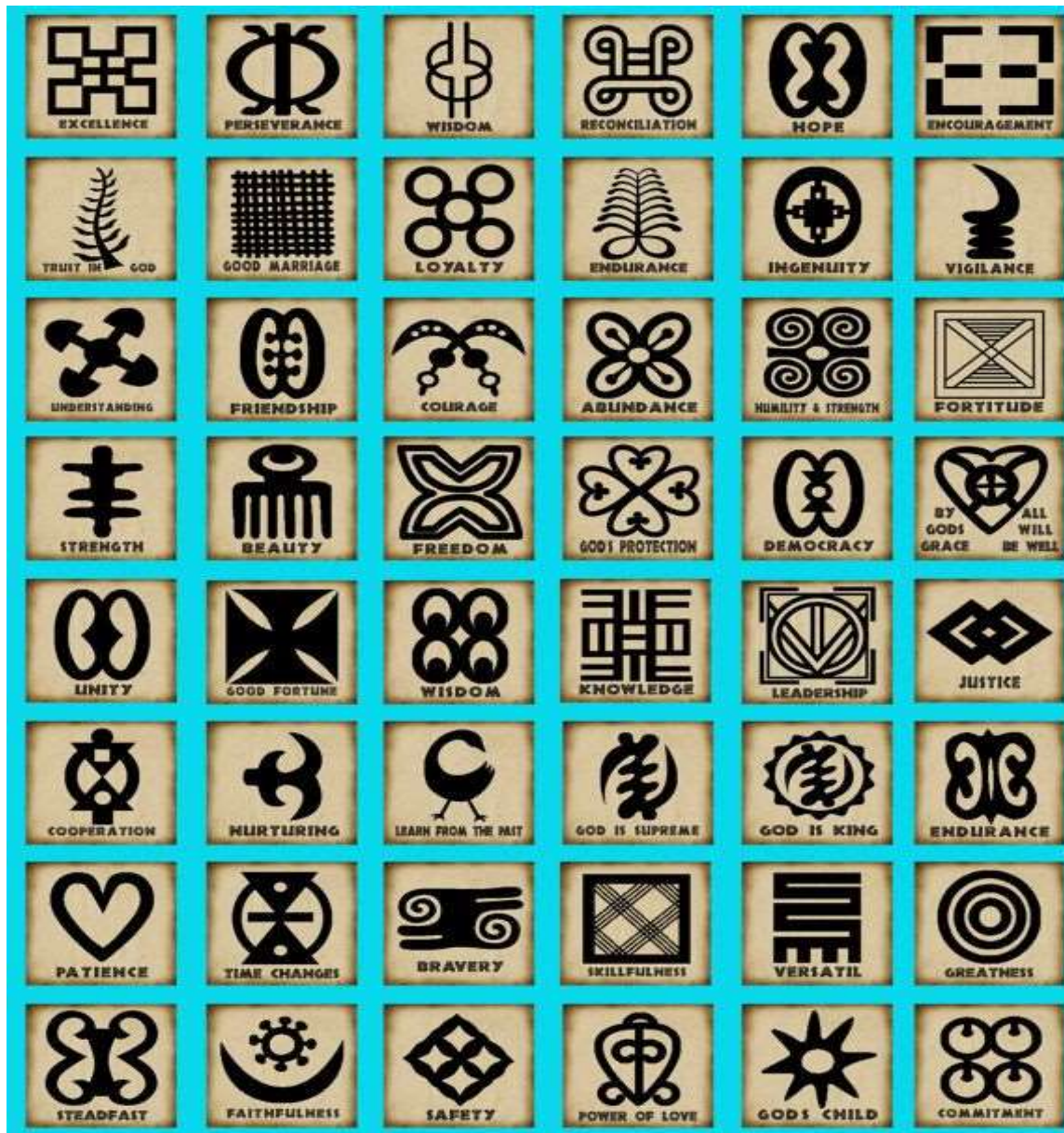
Traditional quilters still stitch and applique the symbolism that served as signage to escaping slaves. These symbols significantly aided their escape from Southern slave states to northern parts of the United States where they could become agents of their own free will irrespective of a master. Unsuspecting slave trackers overlooked the quilts with the random patterns as mere blankets hanging out to dry on the clothesline. Unbeknownst to them, they were signs to the fleeing slaves; messages that were spelled out by blocks of intricate, pieced-together designs made from discarded cloth, rags and such. As pieced quilts, whole blankets made from precisely measured squares or random-sized cuts of bolted material and/or discarded clothing and rags, the patches served as well-versed messaging. No Morse code, these stitched designs were much more intricate than mere dashes and dots . . .

Secret Codes of Quilt



These directions that were rendered on maps meant to keep you warm on chilly nights directed slaves along the perilous journey to America's freedom land that existed north of the Mason Dixon line for Black people during slavery time.

The designs used along the trails of the escaping slaves' uncharted route, popularly known as "The Underground Railroad," no doubt, had an aesthetic relation to African symbology. Seen as African cultural retentions, some design elements had transferable meaning and were readily recognized by those who still remembered their African visual language.



These symbols are Adinkra in design and context. Adinkra is an Akan word derived from the Akan people of Ghana, West Africa. More than one half of the twelve million Africans stolen

into the Atlantic slave trade came from West Africa, popularly referred to as the “Gold Coast” thusly named for the large quantities of gold found in the area.

Modes of Expression (on a molecular level)

On a literary note, I never will forget the first time I saw performed the character Gabe’s monologue “They’s mo to bein’ Black (than meet the Eye)” from Charles Gordone’s play “No Place To Be Somebody” . . .

They’s mo to bein Black than meet the Eye!

Bein’ Black, is like the way ya walk an’ Talk!

It’s a way’a lookin’ at life!

Bein’ Black, is like sayin’, “What’s happenin’, Babe!”

An’ bein’ ‘understood!

Bein’ Black has a way’a makin’ ya call some-body a mu-tha-fuck-ah,
an’ really meanin’ it!

An namin’ eva’body broth-tha,
even if you don’t!

Bein’ Black, is eatin’ chit’lins an’ wah-ta-melon,
an’ to hell with anybody, if they don’t like it!

Bein’ Black has a way’a makin’ ya wear bright colors
an’ known’ what a fine hat or a good pair’a shoes look like
an’ then—an’t then—

It has a way’a makin’ ya finger pop!

Invent a new dance! Sing the blues! Drink good Scotch!
Smoke a big seegar while pushin'a black Cadillac with white sidewall tires!
It's conkin yo' head! Wearin' a black rag to keep the wave!
Carryin' a razor! Smokin' boo and listenin' to gut-bucket jazz!
Yes! They's mo' to bein' Black than meets the eye!
Bein' Black is gittin' down loud an' wrong! Uh-huh!
Or gittin' sanctified an' holy an' grabbin' a han'ful'a
the sistah nex' to ya when she starts speakin' in tongues!
Bein' Black is havin' yo' palm read!
Hittin' the numbers!
Workin' long an' hard an' gittin' the
short end'a the stick an' no glory!
It's knowin' they ain't no difference 'tween
white trash an' white quality! Uh-huh!
Bein' Black is huggin' a fat mama an' havin' her smell like ham-fat, hot bisquits
An' black-eyed peas!
Yes! They's mo' to bein' Black than meets the eye!
Bein' Black has a way'a makin' ya mad mos' of the time,
hurt all the time
an' havin' so many hangups, the problem'a soo-side don't even enter yo' min'!
It's buyin' what you don't want, beggin' what you don't need!
An' stealin' what is yo's by rights!
Yes, They's mo' to bein' Black than meets the eye!

It's all the stuff that nobody wants but cain't live without!

It's the body that keeps us standin'!

The Soul that keeps us goin'!

An' the spirit that'll take us thooo!

Yes! They's mo' to bein' Black

than meet

The eye!

When I saw this monologue performed by one of the founding members of The Beale Street Repertory Company, a strong actor by the name of Herbert Hall, *I nearly lost my mind!* It was the call that made me run to theatre as an outlet for my artistic energies.

Thank goodness for a forward-thinking group of Black college students (mentored by the Grand Dame of the University of Memphis' Black Theatre Department, Erma Clanton) who made real their vision to found the first and, for a very long time, the only Black Theatre company of America's Mid-South. Thanks to their broad connections in all things theatrical and communications-related, I became well-versed in all my artistic loves—theatre, radio, film, millinery, creative writing, oratory, dance—by the time I graduated from high school. With their support and urging, I made the correct decision to attend Brown University and be mentored by the man who served as the personal secretary to poet Langston Hughes, George Houston Bass. Under George's tutelage, I committed myself to explore art on my own terms, to amplify the spirit sounded by the collective voice of Black Americana, and to reference tradition when laying the soul foundation for my artistic expression.

Within the context of this project, as discovered during my research, I came about the literary aspect of my work honestly. I found it in my on-going effort to use poetry as a health

literacy model to address a malady that personally affects me and mine. In a truly serendipitous fashion, I found that the malady may exist in my family bloodline as the propensity to poet also exists in the blood.

I and veritably everyone on this planet possesses a G6pd enzyme. To a greater degree, people of sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and the Middle East are known to possess it in its deficient form. In this respect, it is referred to as **G6pd enzyme deficiency**. I was driven to research this malady when I was kept from travel on behalf of the Peace Corps because my travel to Kenya to join my husband who was serving as the District Director of Mombasa would have proven fatal. To me. Not my husband. Not my daughter. Just to me.

I was counseled that the malaria to which I would be exposed to upon travel, would not be detrimental to me due to my malady. For the most part, it would be the sulfa-derived prophylactic used to combat the malaria that proved fatal if I ingested it over a long period of time. My husband's appointment was a five-year commitment, at the least.

Suffice it to say, my husband returned to the United States—his dream job aborted due to my genetic predisposition. True to its genetic mutation, my youngest son also has G6pd enzyme deficiency. In my quest to learn more, to understand how this malady might further complicate my life and the life of my young family, I went on a research quest. Since this all took place before the public incorporation of the WorldWideWeb, I scoured the card catalogues of major libraries in every city we lived in, including the Library of Congress. I am now saturated with a knowledge of the malady that spans ancient lore to pop-culture nuance with scientific lingo embedded in between, and replete with visuals. However, the most awesome discovery is the one that brings all the research home to me, literally.

Hidden in plain sight, on the electronic pages of <PoemHunter.com> was the bio of Black American poet George Moses Horton (1798–1883). Horton was born on a tobacco farm, slave to Scottish-born William Horton. He is known to be the first Black man to publish a book in the South. The book was comprised of poetry that publicly protested slavery. Besides the

- shared nature of my maternal family name to his—Horton—,
- irrespective of the fact that he and his kinfolk, slave and more than likely free, raised tobacco as did the folk on my maternal side
- and aside from the fact that we are both poets with a penchant for protest,

when I read his poem that chronicled his reaction to sulfur, I cried. It reads,

Troubled With The Itch, And Rubbing Sulfur

'Tis bitter, yet 'tis sweet,
Scratching effects but transient ease;
Pleasure and pain together meet,
And vanish as they please.

My nails, the only balm,
To ev'ry bump are oft applied,
And thus the rage will sweetly calm
Which aggravates my hide.

It soon returns again;
A frown succeeds to ev'ry smile;
Grinning I scratch and curse the pain,
But grieve to be so vile.

In fine, I know not which
Can play the most deceitful game,
The devil, sulphur, or the itch;
The three are but the same.

The devil sows the itch,
And sulphur has a loathsome smell,
And with my clothes as black as pitch,
I stink where'er I dwell.

Excoriated deep,
By friction play'd on ev'ry part,
It oft deprives me of my sleep,
And plagues me to my heart.

What he describes are all the symptoms that a G6pd enzyme deficient person experiences when they ingest/come in contact with/are exposed to sulfur. His poeted symptoms, mine. I paused . . . and then, burst alive with questions . . .

Were slavers aware of the nature of this malady? If they were, did they manipulate the lives of those effected to curry favor? exact loyalty? curb rebellion? Did they use it to wield extreme control? Did the slaves know? What are ways in which the insidious nature of sulfur, and its everyday use, effect the affected and unsuspecting public? This curious mind that sees

- the Black hair product “Sulfur 8” displayed prominently in the health and beauty aisles at Target and Walmart;
- who holds her breath when she walks by the shelf display of Monosodium glutamate (MSG) in the spice aisle of her locale discount store or major food market (in her mostly poor and predominately Black neighborhood);
- who imagined, and later saw, the mosquito-fighting fogging trucks blowing clouds of white smoke into the air and the trees of the neighborhoods where the West Nile mosquito was sure to light (again, in predominantly poor and mostly Black neighborhoods),

cringes at the thought that the present powers that be—the ones who benefit from gentrification caused by the mysterious, health-based decimation of entire population; sales of the high-priced drugs used to fight the maladies caused by the above-referenced triggers; harmful products marketed to an unsuspecting public—do not, for the most part. The use of chemical warfare to control a population is a well-practiced tool of the greedy. Daily news reports publicize stories about:

- the toxic chemtrails that dust the California grapevines and leave hundreds of poor, mostly undocumented field workers with respiratory illnesses and physical deformities;

- the deadly Sarin gas attacks used to make terroristic political points in Japan and to clear land for battle-waging in Syria, that leave hundreds of innocent human-beings dead in their wake;
- the dismantle of environmental protections under the Donald John Trump presidential administration that will effectively push back the ground gained by United States climate justice workers on behalf of primarily Black communities long-suffering from the ill-effects of power plant pollution, antiquated sewage systems and other strong indicators of environmental racism;

and the ill-nature of all “crack” users whose secondhand smoke has their babies nodding in classrooms while puffing on inhalers. The insidious, racist nature of the “crack” epidemic has taken the ultimate toll on Black communities across America. When you are criminalized under the label of “drug abuser”, you become your own worst enemy. By law . . . you have no one else to blame for the devil in your actions.

Ahhhh, me.

What is a poet to do?

Write!

Taking a tip from my predecessor—I claim him as family; I reserve proof-of-lineage for another day—I will write in veiled verse as George Moses Horton did. I will use my words to ‘splay the truth: weaving personal story; the retelling of myth, history and metaphor to fashion cautionary tales, poetic warnings; triumphantly scribe celebrant notes that chronicle “how WE got over.”

Not everyone will get the message and be well. Not all escaped slaves made it to Freedom.

OPENING—TREAT ISE right

Away from strangeness

To the place where there was Air—

Beyond the pale

Beyond the smoke-filled haze

Beyond crystal

Beyond Molly

Beyond confusion

Beyond lost memory

Beyond scratching

Beyond dry orgasm

Beyond gagging with no cough

Beyond coughing with no phlegm

Beyond heart skipping beats

Beyond lack of smell

Beyond lack of taste

Beyond egg smell bad *wait . . . theretheygoagain . . . smokin' thatstuff*

Kain'tyousmellit? I can Wait. theyhuffin2 Glade&Axe

funkayfunkay cain't U

Kain't uuu smellit? Wait . . .

Did

I say

Some

thing?—

awwwwwwpeopleplease

I can stand living

In a carefree place

No matter how calm

No matter how tiptoe it come

Why poetry? my poetry: I will myself to write fast enough, stay awake long enough, fight the drug—*strong, enough*; go without food and still maintain my strength to scribe and tell all about You in the verse I will use to defy onset of the quicken that, despite the headache, still manages to crystallize into sapphires and diamonds sparking deep down in Our/We ebony eyes; poetic truth, written in Your/I voice, reside long after You/Us, the people, have passed on, spirit formed, into dawn. Ase'

And the motion of the ocean

Rocked me into a new world dream

Skin pressed against me and knew my name

It didn't speak it out loud, just whispered

Keep me sane, my Africa

Keep me close to home

Touching skin to skin, we stayed close

We danced on one another when not on deck

And fine hairs intertwined and knit strong bonds

Of arm to leg and hip to waist and breast to calf and head to foot

And we kept close to Africa

And we kept close to home

And flesh entered flesh

And moved the whole line of us back and forth

Only changing rhythm when another one died

And I heard tears fall
Onto the waiting bodies below
And great trees grew
From the children of Africa
Like in ground, were fresh nourished
Weakened bodies and minds were awakened
And into their souls grew the knowledge
That home could be planted in hell and foreign lands
As long as the skin of Africa
Talked to each other
And whispered words of home
And rocked and moaned

M mmmM mmm	M mmm	mM
M mmmM mmm	M mmm	mM
M mmmM mmm	M mmm	mM
M mmmM mmm	M mmm	mM
M mmmM mmm	M mmm	mM
M mmmM mmm	M mmm	mM

Shotgun Houses for an African Folk

You were not meant to live this side of the tracks

because you confuse our ways with sin.

Weak as you are,

in body, thought and soul,

you would not blend in.

You could not live.

See, 'specially on Saturday night when we run away from ya'll, we jerk our muscles so that the body can get loose for the traveling that would go on when we camel-walked to the night train that always took us straight on to our function at the Junction.

It was there that we shook our massive bodies

Broke free from stone foundations with sulfa-laced glass

Flew beyond the confines of a many-roomed maze

Called "for whites only" up in here

Here, we get close in the shacks that are wood and old and ours

The houses that were made by someone who knew

That we would hold sweaty dances

And drink the wine straight from the fruit on the vine

And blow our sweet, sweet breaths in the air.

Our builders know that
The way that we function
We would need some cross-ventilation
They built it so that the romantic couples could see
Sunrise and sunset with unrestricted view
So that we could speak to angels at the front and the back
While sitting in the center of our linear space
To the angel at the right
As Salaamu Alaikum wa rama tu Allah
To the angel at the left
As Salaamu Alaikum wa rama tu Allah

They built us a shotgun that didn't need bullets
Only people to live in an African home.

I Wonder, As I Wander on My Journey Back to Home

aka **Me, Here**

aka **#ICANTBREATHE**

Won't you help suspended me

find the key to unlock me from this suspended time?

This liminal moment; I own it,

but, see,

It has gone on for way,

far too long.

I really do not belong

in this time, in this place, in this space.

I belong in a place that exists in a time

that was before. Not now, but then.

Look. See.

Here,

I figure it may have been

at a time when

suspended, time

found pitch-perfect tonality in an imperfect bar,

much like real Blues in a den of thin-gin

The cruise pitch of a tune bar struck

by a goofing god
caught up in a fit of indecision.

Like,
one day
I turned and looked and saw
The past,
all uh shimmer
across the big sea.
Waiting for me,
all uh shimmer
with kaleidoscope diamonds
just uh dangling from Lucy's woolly hair,
reflecting her spinoffs
—them good children with good skin.
That is where I been.

My sin?
I stood on the shore, one day,
staring out into space for soooo long
that my star-struck gaze
to a time beyond place
was mistook
for wonder.

So, Lust took me and raped me and carried me off.

Mistook my body for booty — my brown skin for gold —
my pussy for prime real estate — my babies for commodity.

My past paid the price for my present.

Tell me how to redeem self, as gift.

I wonder as I wander on my journey back to home.

No fear that I will ever resemble this place;
with its on again off again mercurial pace —

Regards, eradication of race

Regards, preoccupation with face

Regards, constant violation of my personal space.

Past is future; tense,

taunt as the skin of a drum. Master

Drummer,

beat me home.

My loved ones wait at the shore

where I left them home, alone.

Beat me home.

Crossed over to this shore.

'Shore been nothing like home.

Beat me home.

Cast my eyes towards yonder

Yonder is me; home, alone.

Beat me home.

You will let me know me when my penance, here, is done?

I've been gone for far too long.

Done 'most forgotten my song,
and this air 'roun me is beginning to thin.

*—dedicated to a people who have a sense of the past in the present. we are not
forlorn. with the innate knowledge that better has been promised, we persevere.*

that is hope;

future sense.

For Sandy

in these times, when We extend

back, from the day

where june bugs buzz and glow in flight

bull frogs belch; hiccup out their wings

lucky strikes' smoke billow

caught overhead

signal an affair

in the shack

out back

where You go

where it burns so hot

it sizzles air

ignites

through multiple folds

christmas rolls around every day

and thanksgiving comes in june, too

one,

because whenever You open the front door

and steal Home one more time

You bring joy

and,

twice a year, We manage to gather Ours'Kin

to grin over watermelon rinds
or drool peppermint down to Our chins

as sKins, We bend this way and that
over prayer rugs, We sajda
out of respect, We genuflect
We bow Our heads, over Our food
We beat Us in sports
in dancehalls, We fierce
hunched over, We love

there is no end
to the ways
We extend

Wood, You

come over today

We can graze in grass that supports our weight

Wait for even-time to drip down from treed walnut

Peace symbols etched in the nut rolls housing meat

Meeting density of hearts wrapped in oil, encased in green bumped skins that need

Kneading rough-palmed fruit to pull and gather and bounce off concrete sidewalks

‘til cracked open, we color-coat black tan ‘crete to match Black asphalt; walks and streets

Streeter-knocked-kneed masters of basketball hoops, red metal rims with no thread

Threaded in conjugal tense of skid-worn basketball, Ohhhh, back-board humiliation

Humming adoration in the throats of mothers, fathers, watching from those doors;

Beaming toward their babies, felled by muscle-wrung sweat play

We will always run forward

Foreswear CH.13 monsters, fend off cops & robbers, try honeysuckle marriage vows, jus’ play

Splaying butterfly legs; remember confining winter snowsuits making angel gowns circumspect

Spectral glory, laid vertical to face God:

our legs

supported in Spring by

forests

felled,

boondocked,

carpeted on

chemical

mix

of new

moan

grass,

as in whispers

of wood

planted in

ballin bella's bush

I Really Like You

This poem was written to let you know that *I really like you*.

Like that emanates from a place comparable to sleep.

As in like, like a well that is dug deep and widened and widened and rounded, only to find that,
not just water comes from those hills;

the valley also yields precious oil that is like no other.

You drilled clear down to China, baby,

and I didn't have to turn on a dime.

Like, do you know what it's like to like to the point

that you like yourself

like yourself can reciprocate fully,

like your reason for living became your living.

Like, you leave off being a slave to love, because like is all you truly need.

I like you when I lick you on your lips, your lobes, your lids, your love, like, like, licking, liking,
and liquid come gushing and I drink it all up *like that*.

My like, lick, lips, like you know how we do and like it because,
like my Mama told me,
If it feels good to like him then like the shit out of him, baby
said she when she struck the match
as she lit her cigarette
with it dangling from her lips,
like so.

I do as she did tell me.

I like you like I like the morning,
no matter if it wakes me with birds' song or the clouds' rain or the sun shine.
They all tingle me.
I like you that much.

I like you like I like dark chocolate and black coffee,
like I like my men—you, he, them all. We, be free.
So, liken me to you 'cause you know what I like.
And, in this poem as in life, like ain't love 'cause it ain't like fire. It is more intense than that.
Because the more that we touch, your fingers in me,
we both like the connection of this great feeling.

Don't try me on love, because I'm not guilty.

Like, I ain't ashamed.

That makes me like you even more.

Like. Us.

Crystal left a doubly-sealed box of Cracker Jacks

underneath the stairs

She leaves them all around the city

at places where you land daily

in hopes that you will find them

see the package and smile out loud

Surprise!

Just what I need to get a taste from that guy with the sweet tooth and some cider

You on your bus bench bed

She shout HEY at you

You swear it was your Mom

When she tell you

move your feet

make some room

I want to sit

man

your mother never jaw-jerked you like this

you struggle to sit up
you piss your pants
eyes flutter and close
you were always slow to wake up
slow
wake
up

Kindness makes you want to do better
Every day comes fresh that way:
get paid for sweeping the grocer's walk
at the crack-uh dawn
got a banana, a cinnamon bun and as much coffee as you could drink
and you can drink a lot
always could
once you learned that coffee runs free for men like you
when you ain't particular 'bout the water source
like, your gut opens wide to black gold every day
that flavors your piss strong as hell
and the ripe banana – the blacker, the more favored
That was the way they came at Mama's house

Mama lived to be one hundred and three

You crack your toes in the padded Adidas

Crack your back as you bend from the waist

Crack your crooked fingers

That Mama would say, grew that way,

'cuz fingers were not meant to be cracked;

just to be bent back

You crack your neck when you roll it around and

methodically touch your right ear to your right shoulder

your left ear to your left shoulder

Alternate your movements eight times each, right to left.

Your mouth, you stretch wide, and crack your creaky jaw

you slide it from side to side

You perform your regimen on the sunny shoulder of the highway

where members turning off the road to the gym can get a clear view of you

They admire your physical regimen, and give you plenty of coin

It takes all your strength to haul it away, each day

You need to really work out

Yeah

Right

You will not let this lifestyle go

You find your second, doubly-sealed box of Cracker Jacks

In the dry, rain barrel on this sunny day

With it, you discover a warm bottle of water

Plastic warped by the sun's UV rays

Ya'll know that those rays zap germs

So, you revere the irregular shape of the bottled water

Smile out loud

Surprise!

Shuffle off in search of that guy with the sweet tooth

Remember vaguely that girl who you used to eat Cracker Jacks with

Laughing at Roc for as long as you can stand to sit still

'til you graduate from high school

To live a complicated life

You hear yourself

Crystal?

Smile out loud

Surprise!

The woman at the wheel of the Silver Steel & Black Bronco

screams a curse that sounds like a car horn

She caught him at

Surprise!

What great timing

He laughed and walked away from the intersection

Only after he had offered, and she had turned him down

She needed to cool off more than him

The third time

he found a doubly-sealed box of Cracker Jacks

that day

he finally figured it out

someone was leaving these treats just for him

he left that box untouched in the doorway

and hurried away

the fourth

and last box

he kept and ate

he was hungry

and tired and sleepy

and mad

the

Surprise!

made him mad

because it was a tiny pinball machine

that his rheumy eyes could not see to operate

surprise

He gave it to an unmarried friend

Who needed cheering up each night she went unwed

His dick wept more than her eyes

No matter how tempted

she never moved him enough to propose

and never got jealous of him when he sat and watched

pretty coeds studying at the corner coffee shop

she stayed busy

lusting for the boys—feasting on saltpeter injections, she diddled herself as she ate her raw tomato.

Crystal left a doubly-sealed box of Cracker Jacks

Underneath the stairs

She leaves them all around the city

At places where you land

daily

In hopes that you will find them

See the package and smile out loud

Surprise!

the next day

and the next

remember *Roc*

and come on home

Fingering

*If a good love poem requires a little darkness,
how far down can I go?*

—from Katrina Vandenberg’s poem *Abyss*

Children play at cops and robbers
‘til they martyr themselves in a jest that takes the innocent away;
the beneficent splay of tight groin and pistil, natural tenderness,
crisp dew ‘til torn, only to be mourned by

Adults s’play their gen’tals forward, tryst wildly to regain that original rhythm of sin
That make lovers grin in pain.
Like cherubic sexual devotees, exploring
Again and again.

Your dick My clit

I peed Myself

Water drops

When your fingers trace roun’ the opening to my beating heart

Stroke me ‘til I scream apart.

Grow up and have feet like the old women in your life

Grow eyes like those of old men-
with crow feet that belong to birds
that fly south for the winter to nest
so that young birds may sing.

Have feet, young women, one day in old age
that plow grooves in the backs of strong love in mid-swing,
that tap dance on the forehead of the-wayward-set-straight,
that stride straight through Heaven's gate,
that twinkle in starlight when they dance in the moonlight
because burnished feet reflect light just-so
—brown to black, like me.

War Dance

Who will dance the dance of a righteous combat;

The strategy of a noble few?

Shields in the sunlight-bloody, tattered mats.

Catch afire, then dance anew.

Show your face to the worthy one, *Usuthu!*

Not to ones who will pierce you through.

Their rusted knives will not give them best

Status of a dance krewe.

Advance the line! They send more armed fighters;

Fists held high with their blades of intent,

Strike one, strike two and another.

Our souls are now towards *Inkosi*, bent.

A tear gouges out the eye of a mother

The price for not teaching armed warfare to my brother.

-“On the battle field, unarmed dancers die of ptomaine poisoning; the result of being pricked by rusted blades.”—from the chronicles of the great battles led by South African prince, Shaka Zulu

All Me(N)tal

what is left of
charred hands
clinging to a world
heated to apocalyptic Celsius grade
what is learned before kindergarten
akin to donning grey straitjackets
met in the institution
interfering with the intent of jawbreakers
playing tunes on a warbling chorus
longing for a smoke break
screaming through mangled barbed-wire
& into the shadows
harmonious lashed throats
treating you to the human symphony
of “welcome to my heart.”

Seeking

Solace

Why won't someone tend to me?

Like, there's some root rot in my tree.

Like, there's some hater in my shade.

Like, I got cut and now I blade.



Faces of Freedom, My Mother and My Brother – 60s Montage – personal and historical

Power in The Blood: The Women of Walker Homes

Story I: When Something Is Wrong with My Baby

“When something is wrong with my baby,
Something is wrong with me.
And, if I know that she's worried,
I know I'd feel the same misery
(we got problems).”

—David Porter, Isaac Hayes.

All soldiers unlucky enough to meet their Maker in the water during the 1862 Battle of Memphis, their bodies are rested tight in Mississippi mud. The Union Army sunk their Confederate battleships. Sunk them in the eyes of onlookers who gazed at the battle like a moving picture show. Say, some ate fried chicken and drank lemonade and cheered from front row seats on the grassy bluff when the champion Union army ships' cannonball blasts shocked the shins of the Confederate steamboats. Smokestacks gasped black plumes skyward to heaven; the dying breaths of Confederate soldiers that never made it to shore.

In 1862, Confederate steamboats, unmatched in fierce battle with Union gunboats and rammers, emptied their soldiers, dead and alive, into the mighty Mississip. Not one soldier made it to shore. In 1862, the blood of soldiers who fought to keep niggers from freedom and those bound to free them out' the South swam free from their arterial vessels. Like pus from gangrened sores, it oozed, drip-drained from bogged bodies hugging the muddy river bottom in lifeless embrace. Settled in.

When blood cakes in dirt, it dries and flies, dusts air, re-born. When settled in mud, over time, it settles in sediment. It seeps in. When adhered to clay, consider it red ochre slime-genetically possessed. Forgotten was the blood of the Confederate soldiers whose lives were lost in that water during the 1862 Battle of Memphis. It was down by the water, off the banks of the great Mississippi, where the Irish policemen killed those niggers and set off the Memphis Massacre of 1866. Forgotten was the blood of the thousands who suffered and died during the 1878 Yellow Fever Epidemic, whose bodies floated in the Mississippi when sequester on Mud Island no longer kept Death from visiting them. They dead bodies were dumped into a watery grave.

There is something in the water of Memphis that bubbles up from the infamous artesian well aquifers. It must be the blood.

. . . .

I threw up breakfast that morning. Bits of last night's orange Oscar Mayer wiener swirled in clumps of yellow scrambled egg and white clouds of my bubbling spit. Wet mouth-prints soaked Momma's grey mohair suit. We traded scents: her musksweet smell for my sour snot stink. I burrowed deeper into her side, forcing more of my sick self on her. I remember many a school day, I got sick—more often than my siblings; don't know why. Ever calm in the face of upset, Mom slid the cup of water that she tried to force into me further back on the telephone table. Our black Bell telephone with its rotary dial was furnished with a mahogany stand that had a seat, a tabletop and a phonebook shelf. Sitting in this spot, Momma held me in her lap as a single thought ran through her head *who to call? who to call? who to call?*

She settled on this person and singlehandedly dialed their number, as she cradled her big baby in her lap. I coughed, and she held me tight. *Hello. You told me to call if it happened again.* She hung up and dialed once more. She looked in to my eyes. I shut them. Her hand moved the hair that had loosened from my braid, using the sweat from my forehead to slick it back and into place. Call connected, she closed her eyes and spoke, *Hello. It's happening again. Alright.* She hung up. Dialing again, she relaxed and eased her back against the wall, closed her eyes tighter, held me tighter. *Hello. It's happening . . . thank you. I will bring her right over.*

I was a small girl, called “midget” by the trucker man who lived across the street. Momma lifted me effortlessly, walked down the hall to pick up her purse from the dining room table to head out the front door with my arms wrapped around her neck.

Before we stepped outside, she paused and gave me a hug. *Happy Birthday, girl*, she smiled into my ear and gave my cheek a kiss. I wanted to be mad at her for not keeping me tucked into her big, soft bed on my sick day. It was my ninth birthday—April 2, 1968—and I had already handled the wrapped presents in the back of her closet. I smiled, instead, and kissed my sweet Momma back. She opened the door and sniffed at the Spring air. The distinctive stank informed her that Nonconnah Creek had overflowed again.

....

Black people are strong. Women are superior. Black women are extraordinary. Nothing proved the unbelievable power that the Black women of my neighborhood possessed more than what was shown when we, as a community, faced the struggles of school integration way back in the late 60s. Back then, these women donned the role of mighty protectors. I have come to know now, what I did not know as a little girl back then, that it is a role assumed by Black women along the time continuum. My Black women wore it well.

See, I lived in the heart of the struggle or, I should write, *struggles* of the civil rights movement. That strong, demographic heart had a beat that stretched way across the MidSouth. Follow the stream of the mighty Mississippi River and you will know what I mean; follow the path of the Trail of Tears of the indigenous people, the flight of slaves along the banks of that mighty waterway, see the passage of many bloated lifeless bodies that bore the scares of yellow fever, lynching, too-much liquor, too-many woes that floated down to the Gulf of Mexico via that watery byway. My hometown of Memphis, Tennessee was built on the bluff that rose above it all.

My hometown of Memphis, Tennessee: where an assassin's bullet felled civil rights leader Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. That action started a movement that wreaked much havoc before promising change. From the soil of this place, dampened with martyr's blood and mixed with tar pitch and charred brethren's remains, grew these women. At this confluence of mighty rivers – the Wolf and the Mississippi – of people - Indian and Irish, African and European, Asian and . . . oh, hell, the whole damn globe . . . beset with the humanistic spectrums of good and evil represented in the persona of brave, free and slave, these women grew from infants to respected pillars in the community. All bear witness to their majesty. .

Now, don't get me wrong. At first glance, I know you don't see anybody paying homage to any extraordinary powers allegedly possessed by the women of our Black suburb, Walker Homes. What reason do they have, to do such a thing? Pay homage? Surely not to that woman, Daphne, on Harold Mayor Street – that woman who was known to get tipsy before noon and be straight as an arrow by 5 o'clock PM to greet her handsome husband James with a fresh-breath kiss and no underwear on when he comes home from his long, day's work at the Cleo Wrap paper company. I know that you just can't phantom anyone giving high "props" to nasty mouth Sue who will tell you to "kiss her behind where the sun don't shine" in a Memphis Mafia minute. This list does not place a shining light on any woman suspect of extraordinary ability.

Howsomever, quiet as its kept, They are who They are. They are among the coveted guardians who serve our universe. Quiet as it's kept, all great people possess some ill nature. It is the portion of humanity needed to mellow out their strength. Most say, this is the trait that allows the Black female to maintain far beyond a common human tensile stress point; to keep it together, to hold it down when the going gets rough and the rough get going. Long live the

Black bitch! Eh, Ms. Daphne? Right on, Ms Sue. Call it a survival mechanism that will keep Blackness intact 'til the end of the world. Niggas and cockroaches, yeah.

On the night that the Reverend Dr. King's assassination was announced on nationwide television, April 4th, 1968, I caught a glimpse of the awesomely-tempered strength that my own mother possessed. On cue, she stepped through the door; just as CBS news anchors Walter Cronkite and David Brinkley paused in a moment of silence, an apt response to the horrific event. I was kneeling before our black and white screen, taking it all in. It was a premonition of things to come that I later chronicled in a poem so that I could transfix the significance of the moment.

Momma walked through the door a
working mother of four letting the
outside cold in I still remember her
face knit brow and red cheeks
It was a seasonably cool April evening
Two days after my ninth birthday
She brought the cold in as she stepped
through the door
I merely looked up and she said "I heard"
She held me close and
she said "I know"

No doubt she thought
He was only one man

But I know he was hope

I know he was justice

I know he was future

I know he is gone

Letting me go, she breeze-walked away. Momma turned, told me to get up off the floor and sit on the couch like a young lady should, leave the screen door unlatched because company was coming. I asked “Who?” and obeyed. She threw back over her shoulder that she didn’t know. Just get ready. It’s getting late. *Turn the news off and move it.*

Not forgetting that I was sick only a couple of days before, she glanced over her shoulder to make sure that I was moving slowly but surely. *Thank God, she is a strong, little girl*, she thought to herself as her heels clicked down the hall and into her room. They got kicked off the minute she shut her door. When she came back up the hallway moments later to find everything done as she ordered, a rap soon sounded on our screen door. Before I could get up to let whoever it was in, three women who lived in our neighborhood opened the door and stepped into our living room: Ms. Daphne who lived on Harold Mayor Street, Ms. Sue (who had a nasty mouth) and Momma Mattie, the pastor’s wife from across the street. Upon entry, Momma Mattie blew me a kiss and asked for “Beedie” – a name for my mother reserved for use by family members and close friends who knew her, for true.

No sooner had I jumped off the couch to run get her for the ladies, Momma had already stepped into the dining room with a tray of cut-glass demi-cups and something in the pitcher that we were told to never drink from whenever it contained something because it was always meant for company, only. Getting herself quick to Momma’s side, Ms. Sue picked up a filled cup and asked, “What’s this shit?!” With a quickness, she was shushed by Ms. Daphne.

Mamma Mattie gave her the evil eye. Ms. Sue just threw a wink my way and drank her cup down, with the pinkie of her cup-holding hand extended high in the air.

I wanted to stay in the living room and visit with Momma and the ladies, but that was not going to happen. When she finished fussing with the service, Momma turned to the ladies with her hands clasped over her mid-section and announced that as soon as I left the room, the meeting would commence.

Go on, baby. Leave.

I obeyed and left the room, made a tight turn around a corner to step to and sit at the table in the adjacent kitchen, thinking that I would just sit quietly and listen in on what was about to take place in the dining room. See, there were no walled partitions dividing the space between the kitchen, the dining room and the living room of our small, three-bedroom house. The only true division was provided by breaks in the flow of floor treatments – slatted wood for the living room, parquet panels for the dining room and black & white, checkered linoleum for the kitchen.

Sensing me sitting at the kitchen table -- perched on a high stool, leaning in to listen – Momma's voice rang clear and true, *I asked you to leave us alone. Go and do your homework for Ms. Wakefield.*

How did she know?

Ms. Wakefield never gave us homework. Momma always asked and, always before, I would tell her *No. None*. Ms. Wakefield was the type of teacher who always gave time to do homework in

class so that they could check it and correct us, altogether. However, today, I had homework from Ms. Wakefield and *Momma knew*. Uncanny.

I obeyed and walked down the hall to my room and did my homework – studying vocabulary words, crafting sentences using those words – wondering what the women were talking about, all the while. I was mad at Ms. Wakefield for being out of the classroom all day, talking in the hallway, when she should have been in class doing this work with us children. It was a day of grown-ups huddling in hallways and living rooms, leaving us children to wonder what was going on.

Suddenly, the matter hit close to home.

The ladies in the living room were screaming; one was cursing up a storm. I jumped up off my bed and opened my door at the same time my brother opened his. My brother had been where he always was in the hours after school before bedtime: sitting in his room, huddled over his transistor radio, listening to the latest tunes played by Memphis' Number One Soul Station WLOK. We both came dashing out of our rooms at the same time and did a funky dance to avoid colliding into each other. We ran down the hallway to the living room to see Momma's guests flying through the front door, shouting *Ford Road is on fire!*

Ford Road is on fire?

My brother and I stopped all motion and looked dead on at each other. I am more than sure that he was envisioning the same thing that I was: *a whole street ablaze?!* The fact that he was a Boy Scout probably had him thinking in greater terms of the extent of damage and the threat to safety that a fire along this long stretch of road would cause. As a Boy Scout, he was trained to

be ever-ready to serve and assist. I saw him check for his Swiss Army knife that he always kept hooked to his pants belt loop. In lock-step, we moved deeper into the front room.

We found Momma standing shock-still, holding on to the phone receiver for dear life. Momma's thrust her free, right fist into the air. That gesture served to halt us in our tracks. We stayed put, knowing better than to follow the other women out the door; they left hurriedly to sound alarms wherever they landed in flight. We did not hear her contribute anything to the phone conversation. Momma, she placed the phone receiver back in its cradle, started walking towards the door, opened it and stepped out into the night. My brother and I fell in step behind her. There was no concern to lock the door. If Ford Road was on fire, we will need to gain access in a hurry to move our things out and run. Then again, there is no locking out a fiery intruder. The door remained open as we walked the few yards to the opening intersection of our neighborhood, towards the street that was allegedly ablaze.

I screamed bloody murder when I found out the truth.

Getting there was a one-minute walk: our house was second in from the corner intersection of Healey and Ford Road. When we made it to the corner we found out that Ford Road – the road itself – was not on fire. It was my school! It was my school - Ford Road Elementary School. And it wasn't the entire school. We walked up to the crowd that had gathered at the intersection angled kitty-corner across the street from the school. In an instant, we heard the report that was supposed to give us some relief

It's not the whole school. It's just the new library wing that's on fire.

I cried. I cried. That new library was so new that we hadn't even had the opening celebration. That was scheduled for the week coming up, first thing. We were going to assemble in our school cafeteria on Monday to celebrate our new library that was full of new books and new tables and new drawers full of cards that would help us find anything we wanted in that place, on-our-own. The teachers agreed to release us to take self-guided tours throughout the day so that every student in every class would get a chance to walk on that new, Arabian carpet and smell the smell of new leather and ink before it all seeped into the concrete pores of our centuries-old, mason brick schoolhouse, never to be smelled again.

I was ecstatic about the opening because I had helped Ms. Jenkins, our school librarian, unbox and shelve hundreds of books all week, only stopping when my teacher insisted that I come back to class as messaged by a fellow student.

Someone in the crowd had the nerve to shout "Burn, baby, burn."

Hearing that was enough to let Momma know that the mood of the crowd was changing. Time to take us children home. Momma signaled for us to go. Once there, I went straight to bed. *It makes no sense to keep on doing your homework*, Momma said. *There will probably be no school tomorrow*. It was just too much.

Later that night, I was awakened by two things. My mother was talking in the living room. Her voice was low and distinct. She was using her "telephone voice"—a dialect that only Black women used when exuding authority and commanding respect. Her voice went on without break, but I stopped listening because I was too wrapped up in the other thing that had made me sit up straight in my bed. I was wet with sweat and thinking hard. *How do you spell it? How is it spelled?* I don't know why I was so concerned about this word at the time, with

everything in the world going crazy all at once. But the word that I could not think of had me awake at night and I had to find out how to spell it or I would not, just could not go back to sleep.

When I got out of bed and opened the door to my room, the sliver of light that had been peeking under the door opened into a full-bloom, golden glow that flooded down the hallway from the living room. It wasn't just light. It was golden light. I walked up the hallway, past the telephone on its stand, to find Momma sitting at the dining room table, alone. She held a cigarette in one hand, a pen in the other and a bunch of papers and books were scattered on the table in front of her.

As I walked toward her, she looked up and smiled. It was a welcoming smile from a mouth on a face that sought relief from her sleep-walking child. Not a mouth on a face that had been engaged in talking nonstop for goodness knows how long. As she blew a soft cloud of smoke out of the side of that mouth, she waved to a chair beside her. *What's wrong, baby?* she patted the chair seat beside her.

I looked around the room to see if we were alone. I saw only her. *Momma?* I began, easing down into my seat, *How do you spell will?* She tapped out her cigarette in the cut-crystal, gold-rimmed ashtray that she liked to use for her personal smokes and asked *the wheel that turns?*

No, ma'am.

Oh. she smiled. *That will is spelled . . . here, . . . take this pen and paper and I will tell you and you write it.*

Before she began her dictation, I felt a presence in the room that made me turn and look towards the front door. There was no one there. She began, *W-I-*” As I wrote, I felt my body relax. *I know that word!*

She said that *she knew that I knew that word.*

Too much excitement tonight (she swore to herself).

I looked up at her intently.

Maybe this was just the beginning.

I stood up and hugged her and thanked her and kissed her goodnight. Before walking down the hallway to my room, I walked to the front door. Don’t ask me why. A light touch found it open a tiny bit. I closed it shut, ran to give Momma another kiss good night, and ran to my bedroom and jumped into bed. Oops! I forgot to close my door tight shut.

We all watched her close the door to her room.

Sue and Daphne waited a few moments before
stepping out from the shadows.

I picked up one of the sheets
from those scattered on the table before me; the first page was titled
“The Benevolent Order of Sisters in White.” I pushed myself back from the table, taking care
not to mar my precious, parquet-paneled floor. Padding down the hallway in my house
slippers, I picked up the phone and carried it to the front room,
stretching the phone cord to its limit. Dialing, I misdialled,
and dialed again.

*Hello? I apologize for waking you up
but I just finished making notes on all that I heard tonight. Evidence was found. Three
white men from down past Boxtown were overheard plottin'.*

I am setting up the phone up so that we can all

speak to you at once;

Sisters Sue, Daphne and I.

Momma set the phone on the floor, smack center in the middle of the women's triad. The phone system and handset rose in the air, levitating at their eye level.

Yes. Momma answered.

Yes. You are on.

Static questions rasped out of the receiver, to which the women answered in full.

Said Sue, with Daphne's concurrence,

They were white.

Their conversation? the voice rasped, *what did they say?*

Deep breaths from Sue and Daphne.

There is more . . . to it . . . than . . . more to what they said . . . more. They did it.

During the confusion, four neighborhood boys from Walker Homes went around behind school to get close to the action. They wanted to see the firemen put out the flame. They came across some white men who were standing close, watching the library burn down. Overheard one of them say *no nigger alive needed to read this book*. They wanted to see the book that he was waving about. Got close enough to see. It was "Ivanhoe."

Sue was quick to pipe in

The words that those baby boys said they heard;

I had to cover my ears.

Daphne knew that Sue has said much worse. She was just happy that Sue did not utter a mumblin' word as they hovered in invisible watch over the boys.

Somebody had to look out for them, they both agreed.

Those boys were like lambs in the lion's den.

Where are the firestarters now?! or something that sounded like that came rasping from the phone.

Daphne and Sue pointed towards the open door. In unison,

Outside, tied 'round the black walnut tree

(and they pinched each other's arms through

flowery housedress sleeves

and placed their veined hands over girlish grins).

The phone and handset dropped with a feathery *pstff* to the floor, and a spectre that beamed bright white appeared. It shimmered to nothingness and vanished, without a doubt, to the front yard outside. The women pushed through the door, following suit. Tied to the black walnut tree, bound by nothing that could be seen, were three white men. They faced away from the tree trunk, with their heads lolled forward. They looked half-way drunk, almost dead.

Around them, a group of four Black boys stood arguing about what happened that night. They stopped, right quick, when the women stepped off the porch and walked up. Momma hissed *You're standing in my flower bed!*

Sorry, ma'am.

He did it! *No, I didn't!*

Told you so. *Shut up!* Your flowers are pretty.

You can't hardly see them.

It ain't that dark! Can we go home?

Momma stomped her foot. That move made them hush up. *Tell us what you saw*, she demanded.

After that, we will let you go.

Forced, by the invisible, to stay put in Momma's yard until they did what she said, the boys shook a little bit because they had only heard of these women but relented because they had Black mommas too. After a moment of the shuffling of feet, the bowing of heads, and the wringing of hands below belt buckles, three of them raised one finger and pointed at the tallest son who stood stock still and spoke.

I ain't no nigger.

"Uh unh, no, he ain'," the other boys chorused. *I heard them*

laugh and say that we ain't shit.

We ain't shit, *they said, and we don't deserve to have fine books like this.*

He lifted a copy of "Ivanhoe" up for us to see.

I called my friend over, he raised a waving arm.

The three said *We were standing with ya'll . . . at first . . . yeah*, pointing at the women.

Then, we ran over to see what our friend wanted.

We hid ourselves in the dark, *saw them standing with the white firemen,*

talking 'bout the good job they'd done, uh huh.

The women released the four boys who ran home, to eat and sleep and forget about what they had been through, at least the part that took place in Momma's yard. Sue rolled up her flowered, housedress sleeves and beat a design on the captives who were awakened to receive their fate. Once she was satisfied and the other women had their go, the men were released to disappear to Heaven knows where with the spectre in white. Those three and their kind were never seen in Walker Homes again, after that night or forever. Chore done, Sue and Daphne went home.

Later, Momma had a midnight conversation with the raspy voice; she just had to call to confirm this thought *If we can do so much good in Walker Homes, ridding our neighborhood of evil, then why can't we work in other parts of the world? . . . Why didn't you let us protect King?*

King was out of your jurisdiction gasped the raspy voice.

With that, Momma turned red with anger and hung up the phone.

In the wake of all this, I slept soundly. I had will strongly fixed in me now, thanks to my Momma, I did. I wonder how it would do me when I grew up to be a woman like her.

Someone screamed in the night, and Momma flew out the door.



Delta Sky Turn Blue Right Before Dawn

The body electric flowed through and sparked the crowd that filled Clayborn Temple to capacity. In the aftermath of his most rousing speech to-date, the Baptist preacher walked alone amidst the shadow and light of Beale Street. This man; he had just testified with so much sound and fury that he had “been to the Mountaintop” to hundreds of battle-scarred believers. Walking this street, he found himself in quiet study, searching for the truth in the lie, in the dark, in the sidewalk cracks of Memphis’ weary blues street. How could he have directed so many to look up and live while his head, as of late, hung down heavy and low?

Raising his head up from this futile study, he looked. He looked up. He saw Me. He saw in Me—not knowing that what he saw was the coming of the glory of the Lord—God’s Promise. His soul got happy and his spirit got satisfied. Believe.

...

Don’t get it confused. Preacher man didn’t see God when he saw me. When he saw me, he just saw relief in the form of a bent, spent old Blues man. I was just sitting there, in front of that place, *you know that place* that always looks welcoming in the twilight after you have had a dangerous amount of whiskey and the wanting is burning in you and you ain’t with the one you love. I sit on my bentwood piano chair in the doorway to the joint that looks like down-home on a Sunday night where wasted you can get the taste of the “hair of the dog that bit ‘cha” smoothed in under your belt before you hit the highway home.

I sit at the door to help you—*you welcome here*—or, push you away—*naw, you best be movin’ on*. I sit at the door because I am a good judge of character and I wished that preacher man to jerk his neck upright and look my way. I had seen his kind before and he needed to come into our space.

We gets a lot of leaders looking, here in Memphis.

That’s all I gots to say on the matter, you hear me.

This one, I wanted to help. I could see that he needed a push in the right direction. He needed to be looking up. So, I started. It only needed a little push to get it going.

Blues man started the tune from out’ta nowhere. Lit into it, just as the preacher walked by

Don’t stop. Get it, get it.

Preacher had to stop and look and laugh. Blues man had the most rhythmic hawk that he had ever heard come from somebody bent on gettin' his attention

Get it, get it.

Instead of strumming his guitar, he had flipped it, commenced to beat the backside like a drum

Don't stop. Get it, get it.

Some boppers were walking by and they heard the old Blues man singing a shout. They stopped to perform an impromptu dance that involved a crooked back, knees splayed kinda' movin' this way and 'dat, kinda' undulation to a four-count tune set to the beat of "Don't stop. Get it, get it." Forget cups half-full of liquid. They got set gingerly on the calm side of the sidewalk by those with a mind for thrift, save for later. Following half-lit Viceroy's, other cups got toss-spilt into the streets, coating the concrete with white lightning as the dancers painted the air with the hues of the Blues—tetrahedronic color that electrified souls and liberated minds.

Preacher man saw the bodies that moved to memory shift into the formation of a circle dance and felt it his gospel-anointed duty to stop them from blaspheme. Running counter to his mission as he stepped to save their souls, the dancers drew him into their formation and gently pushed him into the middle. As he passed one of the beautiful sisters on his way in, she smiled into his ear "We know who you are, King." He smiled and laughed, as he never had chance to be a true saint amid a sinful crowd. Although he had heard of this type of spiritual situation, mostly from the Southern Delta ministerial alliance members, he had never administered a ring-shout of his own. Anthropologically-speaking, after all, it is a tradition of his African ancestry, King rationalized. Every Morehouse man knew that. On sensory reflex, he let out a "Woot!

Woot!” The circle responded in kind. King relaxed into the ease of his heritage and gave his spirit in to the glow.

The old Blues man smiled and kept the circle sacred. Passerby passed them by. We are a world purposefully spinning on our own, I promise you, when we want to be.

...

King stayed long after the young people had gone on, to their lovemaking, to their sleep, whatever do they do to keep the world spinning on its axis.

Looking skyward at an extreme angle, the blind door-keep blew out smoke as he reminisced out loud, *Boy, they 'gone remember you, sure as that d'are sky is blue.*

King did not want to tell the man, his blind friend, that the sky was pitch dark as it were long past midnight. He just nodded. The blind man cocked his head as if he heard him doubting his perception. So, for King's benefit, as opposed to the sky that inhaled his cigarette smoke, he spoke

A blue sky is the flash of thunder that Gaht Almighty himself claps up. There is no truer color of the dawn's early light than that of blue. You can smell it. You can taste it. Rain. Wine. Calm eyes. New Skin.

Then, the Blues man laughed . . . his laugh was like *you don't know the trouble I've seen and it ain't all been bad.*

Blue like promise.

There is dawn in the Delta and you done ushered it in.

Come on, now. He patted a foot. Get it, get it.

At that very moment, photographer Ernest C. Withers shot the picture. Tonight, was one of those nice 'n easy nights, when he could concentrate more on taking candid shots of King. He liked it when King relaxed; more real people could get next to him when he was in this state of mind, and not in high, oratory mode, supreme-servant-of-the-people mode. At this moment, he is in down-home Blues mode; just strollin' along Beale Street in the Home of the Blues, Memphis, TN. Folk know who he is—anybody with a lick a' sense, and eyes that see, knows this man. Tonight. Tonight. Tonight, they let him be. Given this peace time, Ernest did not have to recall any of his former police training as he shadowed King tonight, shooting him with the whirr of a Canon, in black and white and color. It's a shame that King would never see his pictures developed.

Some will have you think that Jesse and Ralph and Hosea and Andrew came out to the balcony of the Lorraine Motel when they heard gunshots.

That is what they will have you think.

I, who photographed the men with arms raised in unison, fingers pointing toward the source of the shot that felled King, know otherwise. Minutes earlier, King had summoned me to stand in state with my Canon, cocked and ready. I then proceeded to take pictures of the four of them, standing along that balcony, in formation, laughing, joyously affected by King's broad smile and rarely-noted boyish enthusiasm. All pointing excitedly at the technicolor display in the early morning sky—daybreak-blue brilliant, Delta dawn.



Memphis Suki's Anthem

Who would have thought that a lil' ol' country baseball game would warrant all this: I was already nervous. This is the first time that my sister, *my big sister* had asked me to do anything for any of her singing engagements. Her “singing engagements” were a big tah-do. There were the butterflies that had to be held at bay with plenty of honey and lemon and sweetwater gargles and trills without end and piano accompaniment morning, noon, and night. Momma's fingers got tired doing the scales over and over again: *Momma was the perfectionist, you know.*

Daddy tried to mess with perfection a lot. He always stepped in with his two cents to contest the standards that Momma insisted on for her songbird, Suki. Me, I would always laugh at Daddy's attempts to jazz up the dull—a Duke Ellington lift to *Ava Maria* or an Ella Fitzgerald doo wop to Handel. He even, at this very moment, was trying to throw in a Sister Rosetta Tharpe throatiness to the *Star-Spangled Banner*. I listened to Suki trying to satisfy Momma's sweet-hearted attempts to follow Daddy's directions on the piano while trying hard to stay true to what the poet, the music and, more to the point, the occasion that the song was called for this time. As I lay on my bed, I practiced how high and steady I would hold my confetti bomb blasts, popping them at just the right moment . . . on the breath before Suki sang “brave.”

Laying on my back, with my arms stretched out at a 45-degree angle from my body, I noticed how strong I was getting after weeks of practice – no shaking, or pain, or anything. Practice makes perfect. I only had one breath to pull the tiny strings and let the confetti fly upward; aiming for the palms of Suki's outstretched hands, taking care *not to hit her in the hair!*, and most definitely not aiming down to the dirt behind the pitcher's mound, the area between her and me. I was aiming for *perfection!*

It is imperative that my job be performed as a quick maneuver; one that I deftly practiced with Daddy's coaching. His approach required the use of book matches to simulate the maneuver proper. This was the first and only time that I had been allowed to play with matches. The poppers were expensive to practice with, you see. So, Daddy bought a dimestore box of book matches and we stood on the gravel side of the garden jus'ta striking and holding ontah books of matches until the air surrounding us was streaked with wafts of sulphur and smoke. A pail of water was set close by so that we could douse the firedarkened, spent books. It was a messy affair.

Once I got good at the trick of striking a bent match in a closed cover with my writing hand—my right hand—, I got am-bidex-trous with it. The thumb on my left hand got so tired in the beginning, but I was soon able to strike two matches, simultaneously, in each hand. My Daddy hit my back so hard when I did it three times in a row that he almost knocked me into Momma's flower garden. Ashen thumbs aside, I felt great! He quickly pulled out the practice lot of poppers and I blasted them on cue like I was the fireworks lighter on the Fourth of July. I am good!

The big day was only a night away.

On the night before the big game, the last thing to prepare was the redo of a velvet and satin dress that used to be one of Mama's holiday, out-on-the-town evening gowns. Coach asked that Suki be as elegantly dressed as the team during this season opener. At this game, the team was going to be showing off their brand-new uniforms; not the ones that they were still wearing from the time that they played for high school, or the Army, or the Marines or whatever.

Truth be told, that hodge-podge of uniforms of different colors and styles made our team stand out whenever they played a better-uniformed white team from across the tracks (which they usually did by the end of the season, because they were that good). Talent was talent, no matter what uniform you wore.





This season, with the installation of the sewing room in the new Vo-Tech wing at the local high school and the timely appearance of bolts and bolts of gray, heavyweight material and a bolt of red satin, things were a'changin'. The ladies' auxiliary——along with a host of female students eager to please fathers, brothers, uncles, cousins and boyfriends (did I miss titles of acquaintance to be had by any of our baseball players?)——they were led by Ms.Brazan, the Home-Ec / slash / sewing teacher. They got to sewing on that material and *Voile!* brand new uniforms, fitted and fine! Coach——*who is our favorite Uncle Bennie*——wanted Suki to look just as good as any old Osh Kosh B' Gosh players, by golly—Black or White!

His niece was gonna shine just like *his* players on *this* game night——the night when they start their season out playing the team from *across the tracks*. Like I said, they had proven it: they were that good. Uncle Bennie kept saying, “I don't care if she hits a sour note and the boys play like all their limbs are sprained or broken. I just want them to shine!” He did care. He just didn't want anybody to get nervous about a lil' ol' game.

So, on this night before the big game, I held my arms high over my head as I lay in bed listening for Suki to sing my cue . . . *brave, come on, breath, bravvvve, Suki, Brave*. My arms were still in that position as I just drifted off to sleep. Momma and Daddy were trying to work out every, little detail of the song before Suki's nine o'clock bedtime. As far as I know, with all their soft,

strong arguing, Suki never made it to the end of the song. One thing for sure, Suki's rest must have been more important than perfection because when I got up 'round midnight to go pee I heard the piano downstairs pounding out some unrecognizable tune that sho'll didn't sound like *The Star-Spangled Banner*.

The dress?

It turned out beautiful.

Suki stood on the mound, dressed in a green velvet and red satin remake of Momma's Christmas evening gown. It was made into a two-piece that fitted my sister like a dream. The velvet green top had an empire-cut bodice and a duck-tail back with a full, red satin skirt that flowed to the ground in soft gathers around her tiny waist. The gathers primarily came from the elastic in the skirt waist. Momma didn't have time to put a zipper in. Elastic had to do.

I was dressed to complement her in a light gray, cotton dress with pink satin bows in my hair and a matching pink sash around my waist. I fussed about the pink lace, yoke-collar around my neck but Momma made me see how pretty it would look with my pink organza petticoat and pink stockings and white, patent-leather shoes. She was right. She always is, Momma is, when it comes to outfits.

Game time, and we were ready and set to go.

I wanted my hair to flow like Suki's. But, as the breeze picked on the playing field, I was kinda glad that my two braids were plaited tight down my back. I would've hated to have to use my hands to brush away hair from my face. That move would surely have made me drop the confetti poppers, and that would not do.

The announcer's voice boomed over our heads, "*Accompanied by her baby sister, Roberta, Memphis' very own songbird, Su-ki Roberts! will now sing the "The Star-Spangled Banner! All rissssse."* I hope that the standing crowd would not be confused when I did not open my mouth and start singing with my sister. Even if they were, I did not care. I just held for my cue as my sister—the greatest singer alive——, Suki Roberts took a deep breath and sang, "*O-oh, say can you see . . . ——*"

Suki's voice rang out clear and sweet. The microphone helped, but G-d's wind was what truly carried her voice around the field and out to the world. She opened her mouth and the words came out clear and strong. She took in breaths at the right moments and pushed out the song acapella. No instrument was needed to support this natural. She was a slight thing who knew how to belt, belt, belt.

Oh, my word!

Suki was belting hard, trying to satisfy the throatiness that Daddy asked her to try ala-Rosetta Nubian-style.

Oh, my word!

Suki was hitting note after note after note; stretching her slight frame to lift her song way up high to the sky.

Oh, my word!

Suki's skirt was sliding down!

My eyes scanned the crowd as their eyes opened wide and watched Suki's skirt slowly slip over her hips, down her legs towards the pitcher's mound. It was all I could do to hold firm and not drop the confetti blasts, to keep myself from running to aid my Suki who done exposed the

lower half of herself to the crowd, the world, and God Almighty. I saw folks' hands go from covering their hearts to covering their mouths; their eyes widening while eyeing the inevitable slide of satin from hips to ground.

Oh, . . . My young mind was in a scramble for cover.

Not so for the old folk who knew.

Those old enough and wise enough and learned enough about Black folk and Memphis and Egypt, our homeland, saw an ancient structure of the Great Pyramid with the golden capstone of *benben* come to life in this Memphis Suki's anthem right before their very eyes. Them folk, they were mesmerized. Memphis Suki's anthem, her song about stars and such was just uh washing over the Mississippi river front where this ballpark commanded a majestic view of water and sky and, at this very moment, a glimpse of African majesty as well.

Suki – *that Suki!* – kept on smiling and singing. Those who knew, witnessed a great shift in time and space. *Where are we?* In the blink of an eye, prompted by Memphis Suki's song, this present moment in time blended with a past moment in time when we brown and black people resided in the Great Kingdom of *Us!* We zoomed there from this regional *baseball* game in Memphis, Tennessee, and got teleported way back in time by a visual effect summoned by a singing girl's Black frame.

There she stood, from bottom of foot to top o' head, she became a black and green pyramid crowned with the head of Mother Africa herself. Those who saw this and knew, they held their breaths for a mighty long time . . . and then breathed . . . and cheered real loud when Suki closed her note, took a most elegant curtsy and, with one deft move, she lifted her arms and side-stepped into a wider, long, black slip-covered, gap-legged stance to sing out, “*and the home of the braaaaavvvve.*”

My smile matched hers as I popped the confetti corks on cue. Brilliant yellow, blue, red and green streamers shot up into the air. I imagined the scene as if I were looking from the grandstand out to Suki: At the very moment of the song's climax, effective as effective can be, Suki's black hair was blowing in the wind; her red satin skirt was flowing and blowing from around her ankles, her legs were the armature for a black, slip-covered triangle that held a live, green velvet-clad bust of Memphis' singing angel atop its pinnacle. Streams of confetti shot into the air as if coming from the open hands of her outstretched arms. The flashes of brilliant yellow were especially nice as they flew up against a backdrop of a purple, nighttime sky deepening above rolling blue river water.

The crowd cheered. The announcer boomed, "*Play Ball!*" Moving as if released, Suki lifted me with one hand, stepped out of and scooped up her skirt with the other. As we ran towards home plate, we were both laughing as hard as the players who ran past us to take their positions on the field; tipping their caps to us as they went.

No matter the outcome of the game: We won! We won! We won!





LOL

Her parents were crazy. They were young and happy and conceived her during an incredible time when comfort and joy steal away to make love to laughter.

A frills and lace room in a quaint B&B that sits upwind from the wharf in sun-soaked Monterey, CA. That was the spot. That was the place where the creaky, sleigh bed was not the only thing that was tight and small in their room. Mom screamed when daddy entered her tight pussy. She was still getting used to his largess and his toughness; this Black man knew how to rar' back and stroke in just right.

Then, he made love to her like he was a grapevine tunneling through the tight crevices of her fleshy wall. Gave her a couple of seconds to adjust and she would laugh with her come as shrill as she screams. The neighbors next door didn't know whether to call 911 or join in with the peals of ecstasy. No heard no more screaming . . . they smiled and lapsed into love.

When they got back home from their sweet honeymoon in sunny California, they set up house in a new high-rise real close to the Hudson River Park. There was no way that they could have afforded the place, not living from paycheck to paycheck as they did. But they were lucky enough to hit the housing lottery. They got to live in one of the few, but fully-occupied affordable apartments set-aside in a building that had a lot of empty market-rate spots sitting smack-dab on Riverside Drive. After they had settled in, in the middle of the next summer, a beautiful baby girl joined them.

Anesthesia kept her mother giggling throughout birth. She accepted the epidermal, even though she felt no pain even way before the contractions started. The woman was in a constant state of happiness. Her attributed her sunny disposition to being raised in total segregation in the deep South, where collard greens grew out back beside the full turkey pen and the back door

stayed unlocked and two parent families stayed together despite whatever. Though less way less giddy, her Father grew up the same way. Being that she was truly this Mother and Father's child, the baby girl was destined to be naturally euphoric.

So, when the Mother and the father received this daughter in their life, it was like she had always been there. Had always risen with them and the sun at the crack of dawn. Had always had music playing; think Roy Ayers soundtrack, vividly radiant. Their waterfront flat was too far up in the air, away from the traffic below, to hear the travails of car horns blaring their way through traffic. By the time it reached them, it blended in like the non-obtrusive bleat of Charles Lloyd's sax from a jazz devotee's old-timey turntable. Her parents. They were always dancing— smooth, soft-shoe, slipping on polished oak soft . . . sounds. She was born for this.

She was born for her Mama's cooking that made her suckle hard to grow up big and strong so that she could eat at the table like her Mama and Papa; knifing and forking into the colors of good smells—reds and yellows and greens and orange, purple, tangerine. Her mother laughed and smiled at her early attempts to grasp soft mounds of foo foo in her plate; *ahhhh*, to finger through palm-oil rich egusi and trade her milk bottle for ginger beer.

This was one of many country-specific plates that her mother made for her father's global-trekking appetite. A Southern Black woman, born and raised, she took the best route to her man's heart, through his stomach, to a high-level cuisine extreme. And he loved it! and showed her with ever-ready sloppy kisses lavished on his wife's lips, one kiss after another above his laughing daughter's babyface.



Ever since the days before their baby girl was born, they would go up to the roof of their apartment building after dinner and watch the sun set over the Hudson River. She was so lucky to be borne to these two lovebirds. To be a part of this daily ritual; as simple as it was, elevated to importance through their love. Her father. So strong. Her mother. Such a believer in the invincibility of their love; the interconnectedness of their being. On this night, when he raised his child way up in the sky, to show her off to the heavens that night, . . . maybe it was momentary madness brought on by moonlight glow. Maybe it was the effect of the chemical haze that they passed through while walking past the Meth head's door on the way up to the roof. Maybe it was drunk-in-love. Whatever it was that made him do it; while turning to scoop his woman into his big, bear arms, he dropped his daughter over the building ledge.

Thought the baby: dropping from five stories up in the air, relating the only other sensation that was slightly akin to, it was like pushing through the few centimeters of my mother's birth canal. Easy, breezy. All thrill, no chill. I was swaddled tight in my zipped up, blanket onesie. The hoodie was cinched tight 'roun my face. Since Momma had been taught to buy baby clothes large, to have room to grow, my eight-month, twenty-pound body floated

nicely in the rippling pink flannel with multi-colored dinosaurs that danced in the wind. The whoosh of wind fluttered my cheeks and changed the way I breathed. I have been prepared for moments like this. I am all in.

No doubt, it was good that the construction workers were not as particular about the façade of the alley entryway as they were about the entryway facing the Hudson River. There



was the matter of never calling the contractor back to secure the “poor door” building number signage. Why spend the extra time and money to give the poorer tenants of this mixed-income housing development some semblance of service and care? No need to waste time and money on repairing the sign. The owners had it on consensus—why call attention to the existence













of a thing that you didn’t really want to exist in the first place. Were it not for the tax incentive, the management agreed, they wish that whole portion—the “poor people’s side”—didn’t even exist.

So, thanks to the divine providence of worker neglect, it was the upper-left hook of that unrepaired entry door signage that caught me as I fell from the sky. Tightly secured at one screw-point, basically resting on the stone ledge of the door’s upper casement, it hooked my baby onesie by the hoodie and flipped me to rest upside down. I went dangling right-side up, laughing-out-loud while swinging by my onesie on a sign that should correctly read “707.”

Flipped on its back by a brown baby girl who fell from the sky, from then on, the sign would read “LOL”—the universal abbreviation for “Laugh Out Loud”—a literal sign that the saving graces would keep on coming despite the most uneven times. Just for the baby, mind you, was the genuine laughter reserved. For others, saving grace laughter that emitted during the most uneven times was the kind that kept you from crying. From crying and screaming out loud.

In my mind I knew, when this incident happened, it was a signal for change. Too much had been contained inside that building. Things were starting to spill out. The inequitable garbage was starting to show. Maybe, that baby was a literal sign, a way to make people look up and see that something just wasn’t right. That baby made people run into the alleyway to the back entryway of that ritzy apartment building, that monster-of-a-building that dwarfed three others that used to boast of an unhindered view of New York’s Hudson River for years. That damn building took up an entire city block and it sat there, perpetrating a lie of affordable housing and equanimity, family-friendly livability free from discrimination based on sex, creed, yahda yahda yahda.

According to the most reliable public records—The West Side Rag and The New York Post—the only folk who benefitted from this eyesore that was only one-third occupied were some hotshot downtown businessmen.

Unit Size	Monthly Rent*	Units Available	Household Size**	Annual Household Earnings***
Studio	\$833	18 →	1 person 	\$29,898 - \$38,100
Studio	\$1,126	9 →	1 person 	\$39,943 - \$50,800
1 bedroom	\$895	18 →	1 person 	\$32,058 - \$38,100
			2 people 	\$32,058 - \$43,500
1 bedroom	\$1,208	10 →	1 person 	\$42,789 - \$50,800
			2 people 	\$42,789 - \$58,000
2 bedroom	\$1,082	37 →	2 people 	\$38,503 - \$43,500
			3 people 	\$38,503 - \$48,960
			4 people 	\$38,503 - \$54,360
2 bedroom	\$1,458	24 →	2 people 	\$51,395 - \$58,000
			3 people 	\$51,395 - \$65,280
			4 people 	\$51,395 - \$72,480

* Rent includes gas for cooking.

** Household size includes everyone who will live with you, including parents and children. Subject to occupancy criteria.

*** Household earnings includes salary, hourly wages, tips, Social Security, child support, and other income. Income guidelines subject to change.

They don't really care about us! was being shouted by most of the folk who gathered in the alleyway to witness the rescuing firemen ease the baby down from the sign. Their fists were shaking the air wildly as they loudly chanted obligatory chants. My wrinkled hand waved the image of the powerless crowd away as I lowered the gaze of my opera glasses to focus on the tall Black man and his wife-- she reaches up to receive her baby from the fireman who had the honor of retrieving the laughing child.

It was hard to see the woman and child. As it were, the crowd swarmed at the same height as she. They crushed in without touching the woman or the baby girl; he imagined laughter emitting from her wide grin that he glimpsed through the throng. That man of hers' towered above the rest. He could see the relief on his monolithic Black face as he moved his family into the building, waving at the shouting crowd as they went. There was a moment for that slit-eyed, backward glance that he gave someone smoking a cigarette against the wall. It was the kind of look that would kill, if only it could. I didn't see it, though.

The throng moved on: forgotten was the fact that that big, Black doofus had dropped his baby from five stories in the sky. Folk had re-focused their lemming-like attention on the couple's apartment entryway; on the fact that this "poor door" was the entryway to this and so many other alleyway entrances for mixed-housing luxury apartment buildings that were being built all over. The opportunity for mass indignation was not to be lost on this band of bleeding-heart liberals. Besides, the weather was just right for a moment of protest.

During one of his most dark moments, Governor Andrew Cuomo granted knucklehead developers a God-awful huge tax abatement for providing a few measly low-income apartments sprinkled in with scores of high-rent condos. Adding insult to injury, they had the poor schmucks who won the booby prize for the poorly-designed holes-in-the-walls to enter through a separate door! Last neighborhood gossip report, eight hundred eighty thousand folks had applied to live in the fifty-five low-rent units that this building advertised. *Smackuh my damn head!* This world. This world.

The police dispersed the chanting crowd: bleeding-heart dog walkers, mostly. They did so, without incident. Not that many “Black Panthers” powered up for the people! shackled up in this neck o’ the woods, this side of the twenty-first century. Gone are those days when those cats would be caught hanging with the Uptown socialites in the way that that “Bonfire of the Vanities” writer-guy glorified ... “That party at Lenny’s” – *radical chic!* Those were the days. He coughs and adjusts his opera glasses. Just the J Crew and Puffy children of bygone social experiments; they are the ones who get let into these buildings nowadays. Bodies who sport slogans and blend in.

After a moment of rubbing tired eyes and taking a sip of Black tea, I resumed my watch. My spy settled on him. This one was different—noticed, but hard to finger:

the man that he was observing finished smoking his cigarette and walked back into the building. The man trolled close behind a woman who wore a trench coat

buttoned up to the neck during the balmiest night of the
2014 summer.

He lowered the opera glasses from his eyes and sighed. It was obvious that she was still
bothered by that nondescript asshole. Still bothered, still bothered, still bothered.

Not too long ago, it was the beginning of last summer, she sat down beside me. Hours
later, he sat his squirrely ass down beside us, on the bench, that first day I met the young lady. I
welcomed her company; what old fart wouldn't welcome a young lady's company? Especially
one who smiled at him and spoke solicitously about river currents and cloud formation and birds
flying high in the sky. She mostly sounded like Nina Simone on that last topic.

But him?! He smelled ... he smelled like he was wearing ten vials of the worst Axe
deodorant on the market. Strong. Too strong. She coughed. I gagged. She got up and left, and
he followed right behind her. I deduced they knew each other. My bench-bound siesta ended an
hour later, concluded by a sunset to die for. I got up and went home.

I later discovered that the young lady lived in that huge cockblocker across from mine.
After surveilling her movement in and out of the building over time, I observed that Axe Man
lived there too. They used the "poor door," both did. Entering and exiting at about the same
time. It appeared that they rowed the poor boat together. He shadowed her like shit on a
brickhouse.

I noticed her, really noticed her, when I saw her deteriorate over time. I mean I, being a retired pharmacist, I noticed her pain. Pharmacists are detectives of community pandemics informed by prescription-based clues. I saw her up close in Sid's corner grocery. She bought lots of garlic and onions and foodstuff to tame inflammation like turmeric and celery and green tea, *stuff like that*—beets, molasses, broccoli, apricots, spinach. I also stood behind her at the pharmacy counter— *Oh, no. Take your time. I'm in no hurry. I am fine. How are you?* I chatted her up to put her at ease—at a sidelong glance, I saw she was taking loads of meds like

AMLODIPINE – for blood pressure—she was way too young for that

CETRIZINE – for allergies—an extremely high dosage – she must have cats

RANITIDINE – also a high dosage, must be extreme acid reflux

– far too many young people have ulcers nowadays

METOPROL SUCCANATE – man, she cannot be that old

CYANOCOBALAMIN INJECTION SOLUTION – yep, she's a classic

ETC, ETC, ETC

The tell-tale entry on her physician's printout was

SULFA (Critical)

PENICILLIN (Severe)

My, my, my; she has all the trademark symptoms. And I did not recall those extreme dark circles under her eyes from the first day we met. She finished her purchase at the druggist

counter and left the store. I took my time making my way up to the counter. Once there, I rapped once on the faux marble laminate countertop, nodded to the pharmacy clerk fussing with prescriptions on the side, turned and left the store without buying a thing.

Staring out at the Hudson, seated on my bench by the river, I felt so peaceful. The thought of getting involved turned over in my mind several dozen times. *Damn!* I let blood when I finally scraped that loose flap of dry skin away from my bottom lip. That is how I self-mutilate when I think too hard about something as annoying as a song that never ends. Let's face it: it would be annoying to jump into this fray. Priding myself on living unhindered by nothing, I let the thought of getting involved melt away from my body like the daylights leaving my sight with the evening sunset. By doing so, by leaving alone that young lady's medical travails made obvious to the wandering eye of this nosey, knowledgeable ex-pharmacist, I cowardly took my place among the long list of people who, through self-preserving avoidance, allow bad shit like this take place under their noses and go on, as guilt-ridden as fuck, about their day.

Besides, he was merely the highly-informed observer. He wasn't being directly affected by anything. He was just the nosey guy with the all-seeing . . . opera glasses.

He did not care when the blood dribbled into his mouth this time around. He wished that he could do more than bite his dry lips to purge the thought of turning a blind eye to this madness. More than that, he deserved to be hurt badly for not jumping at this chance to honor the dead.

They make a whole lot of fuss about climate change this and save the whales that. Most of the environment lawlessness is happening right up under their goody-good noses. She would laugh real hard when she said things like that. I would just smile and nod, like worldly folk do when they are in it but not of it. She kept coming back to this side of town, although she now lived on the streets, she told me, mostly. She kept coming back, she said, because it was basically the only place she knew. She had lived here so long, it made no sense to make new friends. Whenever she hugged me and called me “friend,” I recall her rationale for not making new friends in the place . . . places where she . . . lived . . . stayed in from time to time: “You all the gold I need, my friend. Silver is just made for spending.”

Ahhh, me. At least I tried to counsel her on the best remedies to soothe the maladies she suffered, when she first showed symptoms of acute hemolysis; the breakdown or destruction of red blood cells, the cells have the important mission of carrying oxygen from your lungs to your heart and throughout your entire body. There were the tinctures of essential herb homeopathics that she took religiously. The foods that she avoided and the good stuff that she gorged on. The symptoms of hemolysis needed to be kept at bay.

Her boss did not take to kindly to weird, vague explanations for days upon days of over-sleeping because she did not hear the alarm go off and fog-horn sounding coughing fits that could not be suppressed; splotches of sores (she thought they were shingles) that made her scratch incessantly, though it was the lapses in memory that sealed the coffin on her job of over twenty-five years. When she started mis-counting money and handing customers one-hundred-dollar bills instead of the tens that they were due, the bank fired her without notice and laughed

when she threatened to sue, countering that they should've had her jailed for theft. They were, they preened, acting professionally.

Twenty-five years as a bank teller for J.P Morgan and they dropped her like a hot potato. Too many sick days. More like, too dispensable in a market saturated with the young and vibrant, those willing to be hired for less than the hourly pay she had driven up over years of service, those fly-by-night hip hoppers who wouldn't stick around long enough anyway to drain the pension pool. She was hopeful, at first, that she would land a job real soon. Her litany of rationales for being unemployed for so long—ageism, sexism, racism—came soon after the savings had gone. Lack of money was not due to extravagance; she was a frugal woman who mined her money well. No children to beg it out of her. No relatives to speak of, except the distant ones down South. No amorous liaisons to party it away. To my knowledge, I was her only friend and for me, well, it was strictly a bench warming relationship. “Hi” and “Bye” with tolerable conversations in between. At least, that's the way I saw it. At first.

She effectively pulled me into her life when I noticed that she was beating me to our bench on most days. I was a creature of habit and made my way to the bench after my job as Pharmacist for the local CVS was done. I did so on as many days as good weather would allow. I dare say, after she lost her apartment of fifteen years in that building over there, she was seated on our bench on most days, regardless the weather. Despite her situation, she assured me that she was alright. She just needed someone to talk to. I was that person to talk to.

I suppose it was cold weather that finally took her out of my life. She was not impervious to cold; only light rain, thanks to her umbrella and summer sun, thanks to her melanin. Spring came after a long, cold winter. I was at our bench, day after day, but I didn't see her that Spring or ever again.

I met up with vestiges of her, though, long after I stopped seeing her specifically. I started noticing more and more people, Black people mostly, vacating that building over there. They were moving out, slowly, but noticeably so. Some of them even left by way of ambulance, I heard from the neighborhood gossips who frequent the bench. Ridding themselves of burdensome knowledge they told me "folk were dropping like flies in that building, *mostly the elders*" they embellished with much speculative commentary. I didn't listen to much of what they had to say. I already knew the answer.

See, I have this genetic predisposition called G6pd enzyme deficiency, she told me. I was skeptical of what she would say next because the WorldWideWeb made specialists out of anybody nowadays. Listening to her personal history with the malady, long and hard, made me a believer in her genuineness. I also made note of her unwillingness to make herself a victim of intent. *If only they knew what I know, but they don't*, she said. *I can't get mad at them.*

Glucose-6-Phosphate Dehydrogenase (G6PD) deficiency

- is the most common human enzyme deficiency in the world; it affects an estimated 400 million people. G6PD deficiency is also known as "favism," since G6PD deficient individuals are also sometimes allergic to fava beans. G6PD deficiency is an allelic abnormality which is inherited in an X-linked recessive fashion

At first, I thought she was talking about her former employers and the management at her apartment building. I was so wrong.

This woman knew the triggers for all her health problems. She had been diagnosed when she was a little girl by a former Medic for the Marine Corps who lived in their all-Black neighborhood back home in Biloxi, Mississippi. He routinely purged her mother's medicine cabinet, her bureau top, and her kitchen cabinets of all the products that contained sulfites, all the while lecturing that if it wasn't good for one child, it may not be safe for her and the other children.

The garbage would be filled with commodity cans of preservative-laden vegetables, cans of Spam (because we children told him to do it), shakers of Accent, pots of Sulfa 8, packages of fat-back (on GP), and he lectured her to never, under any circumstances, feed me Fava beans. She promised, mainly because she didn't know what they were anyway. They laughed over that one. She promised to stay vigilant when he went away to attend college at the University of Memphis. Nonetheless, all that knowledge did not prepare her daughter for what she would face thirty years into the future. She was failed by their lack of insight in their preparation: they did not provide her with a defense against the ill-effects of the passive inhalation of crack cocaine. You cannot rid yourself of an addiction epidemic by throwing it into a trash can. Would it were that simple.



Even though she had armed herself with all that knowledge about her genetic deficiency that had her in the same boat as most people of African, Asiatic and Middle Eastern descent, so that its ill-effects would not cause her demise by blind chance, she had the ill-luck to be taken down by another person's intentional addiction behavior. I almost didn't believe her when she told me that she went from taking four tabs of medication per day to taking over twenty-four tabs daily (many of the medications that the writer listed earlier in my story). She added that she was



given a prescription for a CPAP machine—*an apparatus*, she said, *that provides Continuous Positive Airway Pressure therapy as a way to treat obstructive sleep apnea or problems with keeping the airway open for normal breathing during sleep which, if obstructed, leads to pauses in breathing that can happen consistently enough, and long enough, to deprive the bloodstream of the oxygen it needs to get to all the organs of the body. Ay Caramba!* She had that lingo memorized to a T!

She said she knew it so well because she lived it. For a moment, her mother had a boyfriend who thought that smoking at night, while her daughter was asleep, would not affect her like it would if he smoked while she was awake in the daytime. *Momma! That dude was stu-pit!* She said that she felt justified to put Stu-pit! in his place, so one night when the Kool Menthol cigarette smoke was so thick you could cut it with a knife, she crawled out of bed and let him have it: she called him all sorts of stupid bitches and Loony-Tunes and told him that whatever he did in the darkness would surely come to light because her Pastor said so! *“So quit smoking while I’m trying to sleep, asshole!”*

She would have kept on, but all that screaming and yelling that she had been doing threw her into a fit of wheezing and coughing. Her mother ran to get her inhaler. By the time she finished two inhales timed at ten seconds apiece, Momma had jacked that dude up by the collar, threw him out and told him to never darken her door again. Her whole body heaved with a barking cough and she spat a phlegmy, white glob of spittle on the walk. Long after she was gone, the whiteness of her spit still shone.

But before she left, she explained something. She told me why she did not give up the Ghost and call the police on who she suspected to be the crack-smoking culprits. For one, she had told the Landlord enough to figure out that their activity was sanctioned by him for some reason or another. Two had to do with the fact that they were also using volatile substances she deduced, to serve the purpose of a societally-acceptable coverup and cheap high when the real deal was not available and/or to help sustain a high when they were at risk of being raided. Now, why was she suspicious of a person using product to clean the house? She sounded off on that

with finger-pointing precision, *“It don’t take That Much spray to clean a damn one-bedroom apartment! Hell, they emptied enough product to clean the whole damn building! I had to open My door to clear out the fumes. And, since When do you clean in the middle of the night with that kind of intensity, hmmm?”*



I clamped down on my teeth so that I would not laugh-out-loud. But, dammit, if she hadn't elevated that part of her domestic drama into high hilarity (snicker snort). We both laughed, despite ourselves. Wiping away tears, she moved on.

Resuming: Three was the kicker because it was due to her Mother's influence. It had to do with a couple from her home back in Biloxi. The elderly couple—a blind man who played a Fender guitar and his caring, dutiful wife— were the great grands of the neighborhood. They weren't related to anyone, as she recollected, but everyone claimed them as kin folk, she said. At first, they lived deep down in the woods somewhere. That was when she was s baby, and she didn't remember that much. A few years later, when she was in elementary school and had a memory that could be counted on, all the adults convinced the couple that they should come up from out of the woods and take up residence in a shack in one of the neighbor's back yard. It wasn't much but at least it had running water and electricity, unlike their old home in the woods. And they could bring their chickens and rooster along with them.



The years went by and, by the time I was in high school, the elderly couple had moved to a small house on the main thoroughfare of our little neighborhood. Instead of playing his guitar to entertain the children like he used to in that little old shack they used to live in, he was taking it to the juke joint up the road to play for a few bucks and free drinks. He began to beat that wife of his—Charlotte was her name— and miss church on Sunday and choir rehearsal too. Momma,

always the neighborhood Defender, grabbed me one day and we marched to the shack to check on Charlotte. We ended up staying the day, cleaning up the clutter and neglect so that she would have some comfort. A woman so very much younger than Charlotte, took over when the old woman died. The old man spent most of his days in a drunken stupor, playing his guitar on the front porch or being kicked between the juke joint and back by his narrow-ass young woman. It was so sad, so sad that things had turned out this way for Charlotte and her blind man.

Years later, when the people were long gone, and the house became a hulk of a place overgrown by kudzu vines, her mother asked her how she felt about the housecleaning they had done for the blind man and Miss Charlotte that day. She answered, *I 'm glad it was us who was taking care of them and not the city jail.* Momma knew exactly what I meant and nodded.

This guy walked by and, for the life of me, I sensed things change. He was familiar-looking, as young Black men go, in his running gear—jogging suit, expensive tennis shoes—walking fast while smoking a cigarette. He looked our way, nodded, and kept on walking. I knew that he couldn't have been nodding at me, so I turned to her and found her somewhere else. She was sitting straight up, staring out over the water, holding her breath. Why was she holding her breath? She didn't breathe again until that guy was long gone. Her face sweaty with effort, she asked that we just "sit quiet." We spent the rest of our time together in quiet compliance; not breathing a word. Not breathing a sound.

My friend got up to go.

She wished me "a golden sunset" and left.

“I just want to find a place to breathe free,”

she said as she walked away.

Remembering the last thing she said to me,

how she looked the last time I saw her,

made me remove my glasses from my wet face and

laugh out loud.



الله أكبر

The first day that I was told the ramifications of my G6pd enzyme deficiency, the day my genetic makeup literally snatched a golden ticket to Africa from my young family's grasp, was a long-ago day over thirty years ago that led to the writing of this thesis today.

My husband had just been assigned his dream job of Peace Corps Country Director to Mombasa, Kenya. He went ahead to serve. Myself and our baby girl, Naima, planned to join him a few weeks later. Kenya is a sub-Saharan African country swarming with malaria-carrying mosquitoes. At that time, the only anti-malarial prophylactic used by the Peace Corps to inoculate Kenya-bound volunteers before and during their stay was laced with a sulfa-derivative. Sulfa is a major trigger with severe consequences for those who possess the G6pd enzyme deficiency. During my medical exam, the discovery of my malady was made. My husband decided to return to his family stateside. We were no longer Peace Corps.

Over thirty years from that time, after sharing this story and all its inherent public health ramifications with so many, the combined efforts of those supportive souls led to the drafting of Minnesota H.F. 2497 that included directives

- to address G6pd awareness,
- to initiate public health protections to “prevent episodes of hemolytic anemia in target populations, and
- to make a recommendation for neonatal screening.

A few of the noteworthy catalysts who made this legislative law a reality, include

The Board and Staff of the Council on Minnesotans of African Heritage
while under the direction of *Dr. Louis Porter*

Dr. Troy Lund

Kaade J. Wallace

Nancy Smith

Mary Reed

Sandra J. Gaillard

Antonia Wilcoxin

The Native American Community Clinic

The Cultural and Ethnic Communities Leadership Council

Special recognition goes to Minnesota Representative Rena Moran (DFL-District 65A) and her esteemed colleagues. Representative Moran heard my story and moved to make a difference.

H.F. 2497, in its entirety . . .

This Document can be made available in alternative formats upon request

State of Minnesota
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

NINETIETH SESSION

H. F. No. **2497**

03/23/2017 Authored by Moran
The bill was read for the first time and referred to the Committee on Health and Human Services Reform.

1.1 A bill for an act
1.2 relating to health; establishing the G6PD enzyme deficiency awareness program;
1.3 appropriating money; amending Minnesota Statutes 2016, section 144.1255,
1.4 subdivision 1; proposing coding for new law in Minnesota Statutes, chapter 144.

1.5 BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF MINNESOTA:

1.6 Section 1. Minnesota Statutes 2016, section 144.1255, subdivision 1, is amended to read:

1.7 Subdivision 1. **Creation and membership.** (a) By July 1, 2003, the commissioner of
1.8 health shall appoint an advisory committee to provide advice and recommendations to the
1.9 commissioner concerning tests and treatments for heritable and congenital disorders found
1.10 in newborn children. Membership of the committee shall include, but not be limited to, at
1.11 least one member from each of the following representative groups:

- 1.12 (1) parents and other consumers;
- 1.13 (2) primary care providers;
- 1.14 (3) clinicians and researchers specializing in newborn diseases and disorders;
- 1.15 (4) genetic counselors with knowledge of genetic factors in ethnic populations;
- 1.16 (5) birth hospital representatives;
- 1.17 (6) newborn screening laboratory professionals;
- 1.18 (7) nutritionists; ~~and~~
- 1.19 (8) culturally specific experts in clinical methodologies and practice; and
- 1.20 ~~(8)~~ (9) other experts as needed representing related fields such as emerging technologies
1.21 and health insurance.

Section 1.

1

2.1 (b) The terms and removal of members are governed by section 15.059. Members shall
2.2 not receive per diems but shall be compensated for expenses.

2.3 **Sec. 2. [144.1461] G6PD ENZYME DEFICIENCY AWARENESS PROGRAM.**

2.4 Subdivision 1. **Purpose.** G6PD enzyme deficiency is an inherited condition which is
2.5 caused by a deficiency of the enzyme glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase (G6PD) in the
2.6 body. This genetic predisposition is found in persons of African, Asian, Middle Eastern,
2.7 and Mediterranean heritage, and Native American people. This deficiency can cause
2.8 hemolytic anemia from the destruction of red blood cells. The commissioner in consultation
2.9 with ethnic councils and commissions shall establish an education and awareness program
2.10 on G6PD enzyme deficiency in order to disseminate specific health-related information on
2.11 G6PD enzyme deficiency.

2.12 Subd. 2. **Education and awareness program and grants.** (a) The commissioner of
2.13 health in consultation with ethnic councils and commissions shall establish a program to
2.14 bring awareness of the predisposition to G6PD enzyme deficiency to affected populations
2.15 and address ways to avoid triggers that can result in hemolytic anemia. Target populations
2.16 for the education and awareness program are individuals of African, Asian, Middle Eastern,
2.17 and Mediterranean heritage, and Native American people.

2.18 (b) To the extent funds are available, the commissioner of health shall award competitive
2.19 grants to eligible applicants for projects directed at increasing awareness of G6PD enzyme
2.20 deficiency. The projects shall be community-based and include arts-based culturally specific
2.21 methods to improve public awareness through defining health protection measures, risk
2.22 factor detection, and health enhancement by avoiding certain disease triggers.

2.23 Subd. 3. **Health protection.** In order to prevent episodes of hemolytic anemia in target
2.24 populations, the commissioner shall: (1) support good food manufacturing processes; (2)
2.25 address potential triggers in water, air, and soil; (3) focus on identifying triggers; and (4)
2.26 outline ways to avoid triggers. The commissioner shall coordinate with other community
2.27 groups such as the Cultural and Ethnic Communities Leadership Council on activities related
2.28 to health initiatives to promote health protection and disease prevention as it pertains to
2.29 G6PD enzyme deficiency.

2.30 **Sec. 3. RECOMMENDATION.**

2.31 The commissioner of health shall request that the Newborn Screening Advisory
2.32 Committee add G6PD enzyme deficiency to the newborn screening tests.

3.1 Sec. 4. APPROPRIATION.

3.2 \$..... in fiscal year 2018 is appropriated from the general fund to the commissioner of

3.3 health for the purposes of section 2.

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