

NIKKY FINNEY

*Love Child's*

HOTBED OF OCCASIONAL POETRY POEMS & ARTIFACTS

AUTHOR OF  
HEAD OFF & SPLIT,  
WINNER OF THE  
NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

# Finney: 'My Roots Are In Newberry'

By DELAWESE FULTON  
*Staff Writer*

Four generations of Frances Davenport Finney's family has rooted and played around a 200-year-old oak tree.

Finney and her brother, Heyward, grew up on a farm near the Silverstreet section of Newberry, where the tree is located.

She said the tree's shade was a gathering place for her family.

"We would hang the hogs on the limbs of the tree, rest under the tree after working in the fields and tell stories under the tree," she said. "That oak tree was one of the joys of being out there. As a youngster, that's where my joy came from."

As a child, Finney painted "imaginary pictures" under the tree.

"I would go to the garden and get beets to make red color ... carrots for yellow ... and greens for green," she said.

Finney would "mush" the vegetables and use their juices for paint.

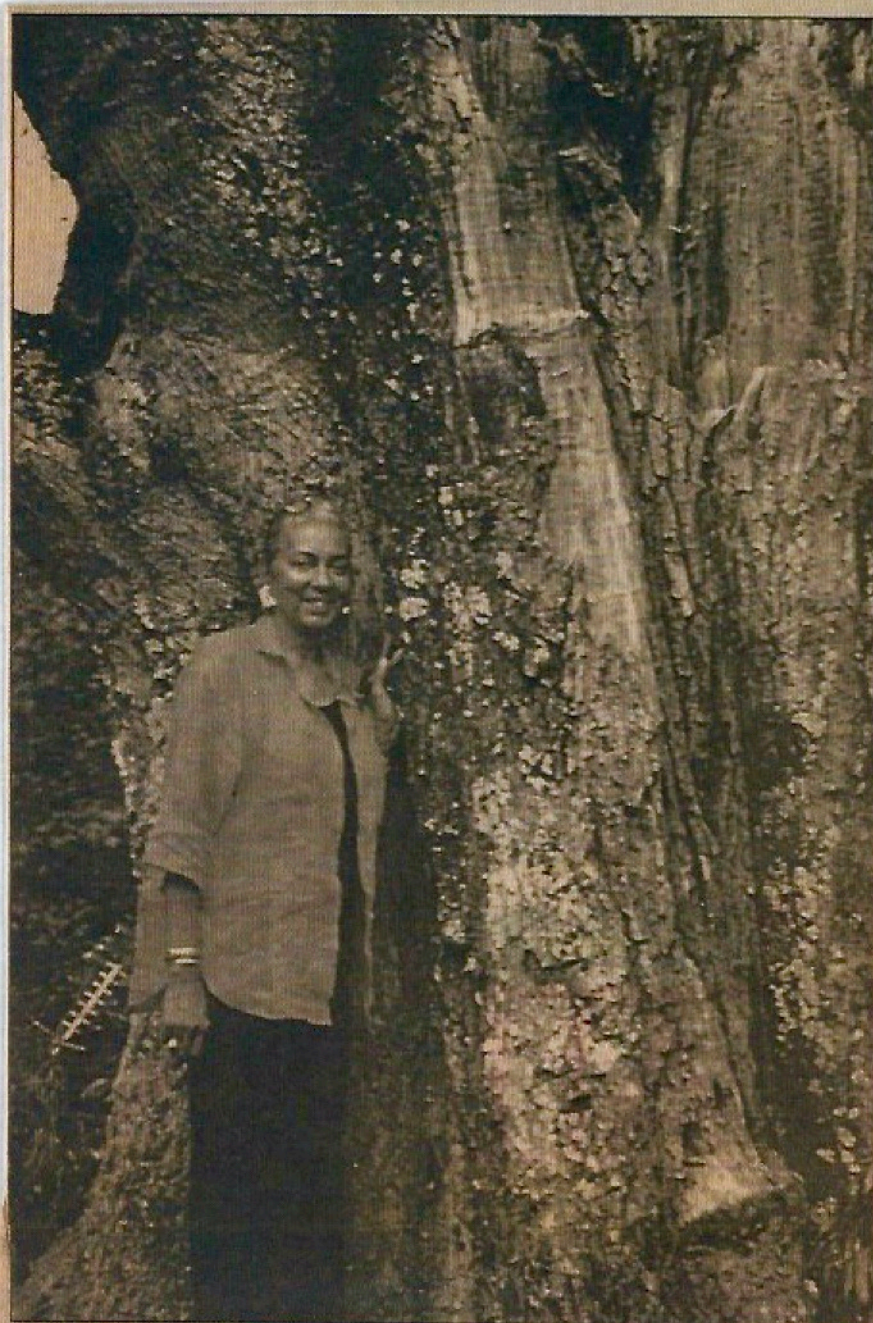
The tree marks her family's beginnings in 1857 when great-grandmother Lindley Shelton started a family there.

"The tree was the focal point for Lindley to build her two-room house," Finney said.

That house now has more than eight rooms and has nurtured four generations of Sheltons and Davenports, she said.

"Well, I think growing up on a farm is an experience I'll never forget ... There should always be a little corner that gives you joy," she said.

Finney is the daughter of Leo and Beulah Davenport of Newberry. She was graduated from Claflin College, Orangeburg, and is the wife of South Carolina Supreme Court Chief Justice Ernest Finney.



Observer Photo by Delawese Fulton

Frances Finney stands beside the 200-year-old family tree, located near Silverstreet.

HOTBED

98

A creek fat with tadpoles and a honey jar to catch them in. Rocks made of silver quartz dazzling every broken em-dash inch of red earth. The salt blocks have been set out in the pasture for the cows. We are children fat with Newberry summers and we will have cabbage for dinner whether we like it or not. We will have lots of cabbage. As my grandmother spoons it on our plates she will say, *Back in my day cabbage used to kill people.* She will throw her head back and laugh out loud and the safety pin that she always wears on the front of her blouse near her heart will shine in the morning sun. The boys will not hear her like I will hear her, just like they will never notice her safety pin. I will keep chewing without pause as if it might be the last time I taste anything. But in one of those final mandible moments I will decide that I will not die by cabbage. I will make up my mind as the cabbage gets lee-little in my mouth that the only reason my grandmother keeps telling us the cabbage story is so we remember to pay close attention to the hand that moves from the whatsoever pot of our future into our open hungry mouths. ■

They tell me that she spent her days staring at the eyes of peonies, the fragile skin of day lilies, the open mouths of daffodils, the waxy and waning winks and pinks of peace lilies. I'm telling you this woman knew flowers. They say she was driving to work when she saw him, or did they say she was delivering a bouquet of fresh cut flowers to someone on their birthday, or had just come from the door of some sweet couple's fiftieth anniversary? I can't remember all of that right now. All I can think about is what she must have known about flowers before this moment began. I know she was a woman out on the road driving and paying very close attention to the world around her. She was also a woman who did not look away when she saw his soup-bowl haircut pass by one lane over. Was his upside-down empty vase of a neck the giveaway? In the car that was not going too fast and not going too slow. In the car that had a backseat. Was the backseat where he put the gun that he had just used to kill the nine praying sunflowers of Mother Emanuel? Or was the gun there in the front seat with him? By then, back in Charleston the nine passion flowers were slumped on the basement floor inside the church. The nine calla lilies had been snapped in two. She saw his funny haircut and quickly recognized him as the one who had just taken the lives of the nine human beings, in mid and full bloom, who had welcomed him, called him son, invited him to sit and be with them in the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost. Twelve fragrant gardenias had welcomed him to their circle and the flower lady was the one who recognized the long flowerless vase of his neck and made the call. What did she say on that phone? *Hello. I'm calling to report a sighting. That young man you are looking for . . . who shot up that church . . . he's here on the highway with me . . . a black Hyundai. I know it's him, he's covered in pollen.* ■



## Black Boy with Cow: A Still Life

*Still life can be a celebration of material pleasures such as food and wine, or often a warning of ephemerality of these pleasures and the brevity of human life.*

—DEFINITION OF "STILL LIFE," TATE GALLERIES WEBSITE

On the occasion of George J. Stinney Jr., fourteen, the youngest to die in the electric chair in these United States of America, commissioned by the University of Arizona Poetry Center's Art for Justice grant

### BEFORE

We stand before the bowl of his eyes, no fruit in the picture, the curve and curl of his desires waiting to be filled, he looks sideways back at us, we could fill his bowl with hundreds of his black boy sketches, airplanes, automobiles, at the very

Least, at the very least, we could fill it with his cow, with his penitentiary record, George J. Stinney Jr., Age: fourteen, Height: five feet, Weight: ninety-five pounds, Hair: Negro, Eyes: dark maroon. Home: Alcolu, rural South Carolina.

In 1944, there are Black churches and white churches, Black schools, white schools, white girls, Black boys. There are railroad tracks. There are always railroad tracks when there are white girls and Black boys living two hundred feet from each other.

This is the Jim Crow South. If you are Black and riding in a car please make sure the car you are passing does not contain white people. This is the cotton law of the cotton land. If you are walking do not walk near or brush against a white person

Who is also walking. Touching a white person is illegal. If you are lost and need to ask a white person how to get home be inclined to stay lost. Do not ask for help with N-S-E-W, you could be arrested for asking a white person for directions.

Remember, the eyes of (any) white person are always out of range. This is the story of a Black boy with a cow and his pencils. His still life. His Black boy no-way-out life. This is the still life of George J. Stinney Jr. of Alcolu.

Thursday, March 23, 1944: Two girls, white, were last seen on one bike, out looking for maypops. Friday, March 24, 1944: Two bodies of two girls, Betty June Binnicker, eleven, Mary Emma Thames, seven, are found side by side, on their

Backs, in three inches of water, the bike they were seen riding the day before has been laid across their bodies like a paperweight. A report comes in. George Junius Stinney Jr., fourteen, is the last person to *see* the girls. Does this mean last to *look* at the

Girls, who were out looking for maypops and stopped to ask where they were? The census of the Jim Crow South does show there were mystics alive in 1944, white people who saw things that Black people did not. The girls stopped to ask George

And his sister, Aimé, if they had seen any maypops and if so —where? In the Jim Crow South, Black children know that one-word answers are best and make for fewer bruises. Black children are taught this in utero. Aimé answers for them both,

No. A maypop is the fruit of the passion flower. When it turns from bright green to orange it is sweet, succulent, ready to eat. When you step on a maypop before it is ready it makes a popping sound. The bodies of the girls were found on the Black side

Of town. Beaten to death with a railroad tie—or hammer. Two skulls smashed, two hymens intact, the eleven-year-old has a bruise. They think there is semen on her thigh. We must now put the word “semen” in the bowl beside the cow. The language

Of rape has entered the community switchboard. All operators are busy and not standing by. The bowl which only had a cow and the boy’s drawing pencils now has the word “semen” but not the word “Proof.” “Semen” is a word that stretches back

Hundreds of years to that great camp meeting where skins of different color were measured and weighed on a scale along with various-size craniums all inched and ranked by protractor, sun dial, caliper, and numerical tape. The word-of-mouth,

Over-the-fence, long-playing record that the operators are now spinning wildly is the very reason there are railroad tracks in Southern towns with different people with different-colored skin living on different sides. One side of town can’t play the song

Enough. The other side is hurrying to get out of town before the song stops playing. There will never be evidence to support the song that is played on high repeat. The repeat-song is now and forever one of the Republic’s greatest hits. It has now been

Placed in the bowl with the Black boy and his cow and what they believe is semen. This is the Black boy’s still life. The man who found the girls says there was not much blood around the ditch itself. He adds that it looks as if they were killed somewhere

Else. But no one ever looks for somewhere else. Because all the memorable catchy high notes of the long-playing song have now been memorized alongside barrel clicks. Before George Jr. was told to take off his Saturday T-shirt and blue jeans,



The clothes he had just walked the family cow in, he was told to put on their blue prison stripes, and turn forward, and turn to the side, to reveal the true colors of his maroon eyes. He was in the seventh grade. A good student who routinely told his mother,

A cook, in the Jim Crow South, that he wanted to be an artist when he grew up. So for practice he drew airplanes and automobiles on pieces of scrap paper. Planes and autos fly away and move fast. Do you think young George thought these were machines that

Might help him leave the Jim Crow South? The bowl holding these boy-with-Negro-hair desires will be collected over and over again. The still life of Black boys will be the Republic's largest collection plate. Four XL men, not with Negro hair,

Arrive at the house that is owned by the lumber company where the father works. Aimé, George's youngest sister, sees the men and runs to hide in the chicken coop. Surrounded by warm eggs and cackling hens. She watches as George's drawing hands are

Handcuffed. She sees the men, who live on the other side of the tracks, walk her brother outside and put him in the back of the XL black car. Sees their guns and billy clubs. Sees that she has accidentally broken some of the eggs her family needs

To live. Aimé is seven years old. Idolizes George. George calls her his Shadow. Seventy years after hiding in the chicken coop she will remember yelling for her brother, *Oh George, where are you going?* George Junius Stinney Jr., five feet tall and ninety-five

Pounds, is taken away. There are no witnesses to the murders. The only physical evidence ever written down is "Negro hair" and "maroon eyes." This is what spins around and around the record player in Alcolu every night until dawn. Aimé's screams