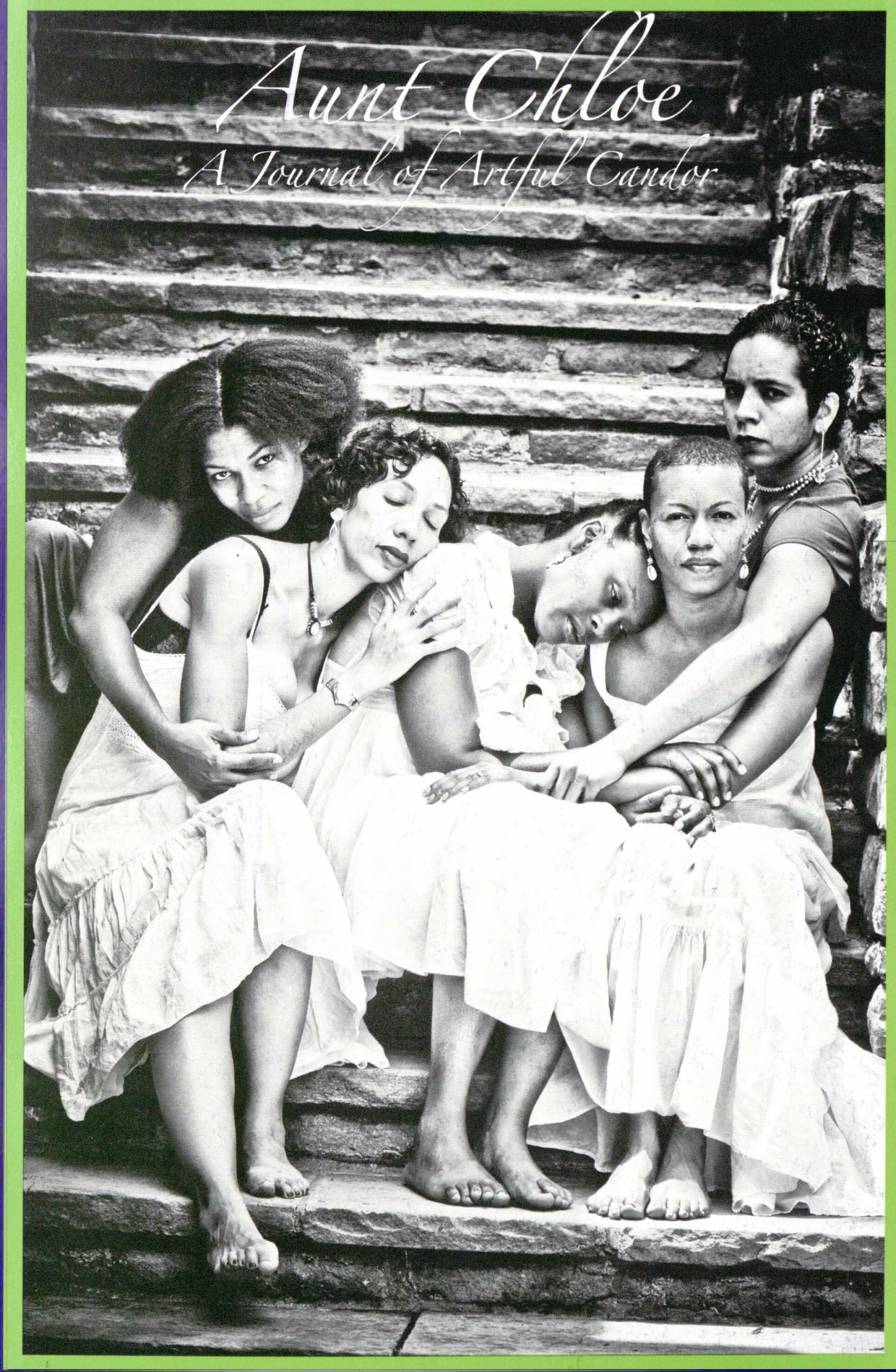

Aunt Chloe
A Journal of Artful Candor

Aunt Chloe is a journal for people who have reclaimed the spaces denied them by cultural and historical tyranny. She belongs to any of us who have been pushed out of the spotlight, yet through art, literature, and dialogue have re-chosen where we belong.

Aunt Chloe: A Journal of Artful Candor

Spring 2009

An eternal ray of sunshine, kindness, and scholarship
Forever in our hearts, forever our Spelman Sister

This journal is dedicated to the memory of Professor Wandra Hunley

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Anne Warner and Opal Moore of the Spelman College English Department for their unwavering dedication; to Bill Barney of Automated Print; and to Rachel Eliza Griffiths for our cover art, "Beyond Them, Stairs."

Editor's Note

I was ten when my mother changed my last name. I remember the night she came into my room and told me that she was going to the courthouse the next day to do it; to officially unite me, her, and her new husband as a family, the Berrys.

I was devastated. I was too young to voice my apprehension, but old enough to feel the gravity of her deed. What I still have trouble articulating is how much my name meant to me; not because it was exotic, or because I liked the sound of it; but because it was mine.

Aunt Chloe: A Journal of Artful Candor, used to be called *Focus Magazine*. We changed the name last year for a number of reasons: one, *Focus* was plain, and it was the name of many other magazines. Two, *Focus* didn't speak to the Spelman experience. Even though we published Spelman students, there didn't seem to be a direct link between the mission of the magazine, and what was inside its pages—and that was the biggest reason: *Focus* was incredibly unfocused. We didn't actually have a mission statement to begin with. We didn't have editorial standards, and the stylebook we did have had been all but ignored in previous years.

I wanted to make Spelman's literary publication, over forty years old, more organized. And so *Aunt Chloe* was born. Chantal James, whose novel excerpt appears in this issue, and who is a former Editor-in-Chief, suggested that the new name be a woman's or a flower's name, and that there be an "aunt" before it. I had this in mind as I was leafing through my *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* one day before class, looking for poems by Black women that might somehow hold a possibility for a new name. I came across the poem, "Aunt Chloe's Politics" by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. It immediately caught my eye:

"Of course I don't know very much / About these politics, / But I think that some who run 'em / Do mighty ugly tricks," reads the first stanza.

I wrote down the name Aunt Chloe in my journal and went to class. That day, as fate would have it, we watched an interview with Toni Morrison, who, of course, was born Chloe Anthony Wofford. She answered questions about her work, but she also expressed her profound and unyielding devotion to truth; to decency; to candor. In the video she said, "I'd rather die than betray my humanity." Later, I looked up the meaning of the name "Chloe" and saw that it meant "green shoot" or "blossoming." Blossoming we were. We kept the "Aunt" because both Chloes are ancestors.

Perhaps choosing this new name has meant so much to me because I didn't have a say in what my own name would be, over ten years ago. Today, I am Kyla Marshell, Kyla meaning "crowned with laurels," not unlike a poet laureate, and Marshell, my middle name, meaning "warlike."

It was Shakespeare who famously wrote that "that which we call a rose / by any other name would smell as sweet." This is true in the case of warring families. But for *Aunt Chloe*, a dewy blossom, a fresh light, the scent of rebirth smells all the sweeter with this, her new and glorious name.

Kyla Marshell
Editor-in-Chief

Contents

Fat Day

MARTIN STEINGESSER

Thirteen or so chairs
around a long table, notebooks, pencils,
a few candy wrappers scattered across the top,
most the students gone, out somewhere
for lunch, three girls having theirs
in a corner on the floor. Zach sits at the table
to my left, writing in a notebook, pencil
crossing and re-crossing the page. My guess—
he's writing about running, a love we share
across miles. This poetry workshop
runs over three hours, but lunchtime we're all
on different tracks. Earlier, just off the bus,
maybe still wanting a pile of blankets
to cozy under, they sat around the table
looking at me, not speaking. One student,
a hand partly covering his face, seemed watching
from a far place, as if waiting to prove the class
another long ride with the windows shut.
I would like to shake them by the collars,
break open the stories we've wrapped them in,
how to be anyone but ourselves, how to be good.
Maybe I am writing this because for the moment
I don't know what to do, and Zach is writing
as if out there running some road, sunlight
broken by tree limbs, a crow bobbing its head,
shouting *Fat day!* as Zach runs past.
So much, so little to ask—Give us, please,
this day fatter, bigger air in our lungs.

Conversation with My Daughter on Christmas Eve

AMY YEE

Come in, shut the door.
I want to show you something.
See those wrapped boxes on the top shelf?
Those are for you.
They're what you asked for in your letter:
Holly Hobby nightgown and slippers,
Gloss n' Go Make-Up Kit, Strawberry Shortcake Doll.
They're not from Santa Claus—I bought them at the mall last week,
wrapped them while you were sleeping and tomorrow morning
I'll put them under the tree.
I don't have time to do this anymore so I'm telling you: There is no Santa Claus.
I don't have time to put the tree together every year,
to look for the decorations in the basement.
I don't have time for the crowds at the mall.
You don't need Christmas for presents.
If you need something, ask me.
Now we have money.
I can buy you things when you need them, not just once a year.
You don't need Santa Claus.
Now be a good girl and stop crying.

MMPI – 2

DONNA R. KEVIC

Directions: Answer ALL questions, True or False.
You are encouraged to respond honestly.

#9. My sex life is satisfactory.

I am nine, in his barn,
the smell of silage,
fodder, and manure.
Grandpap does it
to me the first time.
His *horse*, he calls it.
My *cob*, he says grinning,
his hands coarse as corn husks
I feed the hogs.
In silence, no words,
like a funeral parlor,
a heaviness in my chest smothers.

#35. Everything tastes the same.

Grandma says,
You don't eat much
more than a sparrow.
Even my favorite, biscuits
and gravy, makes me sick
to my stomach, like too much
candy at Trick-or-Treat.
Grandpap grins, says, *Why,*
once I seen him eat a horse

#104 Sometimes when I was young, I stole things.

After a while, I figure
Grandpap leaves the money
on my dresser like I see
him leave tips for good
service from cute waitresses
who know how to please,
winking, saying, *Honey*
this and *Honey* that,

in syrup-sticky voices,
my Grandma sitting there,
like it doesn't matter.

#157. I have no fear of spiders.

Afraid to touch the gob,
it scabs on my belly,
fractures light, glints,
like a spider's web,
bits of me imprisoned
like ants in tree sap.

#263. I get angry sometimes.

I don't know why,
but one summer
I shot every sparrow
nesting in the barn eaves,
their worn-fat bodies
kerplop on the ground
like tiny Pietas.
Jesus,
I don't know why.

#287. I used to keep a diary

I write letters to make
believe people in make believe
homes at make believe addresses,
spilling my guts
like a hole in a sack of seed.
But I harvest no returns.
Dead letters spell out
a part of me
I want
to die.

#319. I have never seen a vision.

Wednesday night church-going,
Grandma gone, the fear of God
rises in my bedroom, sticking
in my throat, supplications,
failing, falling on heretic ears,
his silhouette in the door frame,
unholy picture. Grandpap preys.

#401. I hear strange things when I am alone.

Like birds conspiring before sunrise,
like assassins scheming,
I hear whisperings. I don't understand
why I hid one of my Grandpap's
shotguns under my mattress
like one of those magazines
he brings. *See,* he says,
other men like me and you.

#498. Once a week or more, I get high or drunk.

Squatting on dead seed
in an abandoned silo,
I huff paint. Grandpap's
blue Dutch Boy, spilled, set
afire. The flames, an open wound
on the night sky, the tears
of stars never enough
to extinguish.

#564. I almost never lose self-control.

Just once
I tell him, *No!*
He backhands me,
not too old for him yet,
his eyes like the hoot owl's
when I slap him back and
aim that 12-gauge at him. That grin
of his returns, like he knows I don't have it in me,
how the voices shut up after the scream of the blast.

Grandma prays for both our souls, quotes me scripture:
You are worth more than many sparrows.

I don't believe.

Time is up. Put your pencil down
and return to your cell.

Catering to the Cult of Remembrance

RANDALL HORTON

Several, although blocks
from the frisbee throwers, the sightseers
& dog walkers scooping dog shit,
the lady far away from the Jefferson tour bus
keeps searching tapered avenues,
the faces of nondescript pedestrians
until she, photographer,
locates a man blended into the architecture.

On a dark blue milk crate he sits
under a half denuded tree
leaves have faded to yellow
harmonizing a decayed rowhouse
that is backdrop,
a perfect contrast to the rebirth
of the city, or so she thinks

her camera's lens becomes privileged—
a recorder to solidify this still frame
as she adjusts then readjusts
until ridges in the man's forehead
his cleft of chin, his soiled clothes,
even the fold of his back comes to focus.

The old man cannot see or hear growth,
not even brick by brick condos rising,
nor a faint wood-saw's whine.
His eyes: bottomless gray wells
filled with sunflowers & wild clover
before the many soup lines of bologna
on white bread no mayo, a cup of juice, & an apple.

He is stuck in the blues in his head
revisiting a past without addiction,
without the urge for something better
than a lover's satin touch, thinking
how he has ended in rubble & ruin,
his body, a wasteland of flesh
& how he is the vestige of life.
The lady, far away from the Jefferson tour bus,
flash-snaps this evolving history.

**Title taken from Walter Benjamin's The Work of Art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction*

Grace Jones 2007, Corinne Stevie Francilus

Pinky's Revenge

MONICA A. HAND

for Betye Saar

At eighty revolutions around the sun
Your face has become the quilter's patchwork
The remembering and the forgetting ache

Knots, clocks, and other objects hidden
Underground like you were a leprechaun

Juju bag of tricks strung to your neck
Begs your tiny body don't topple and break

China doll in a box marked 'do not open'

Monkey wrench turns the wagon wheel
Gingham bandana tied with a little voodoo
Aunt Jemima's gun cocked and aimed

Your pink babies won't be nobody's fools
Just because they look white and their eyes are blue
They still know how to undo the hangman

Go 'head tell Miss Sally

MONICA A. HAND

for Kara Walker

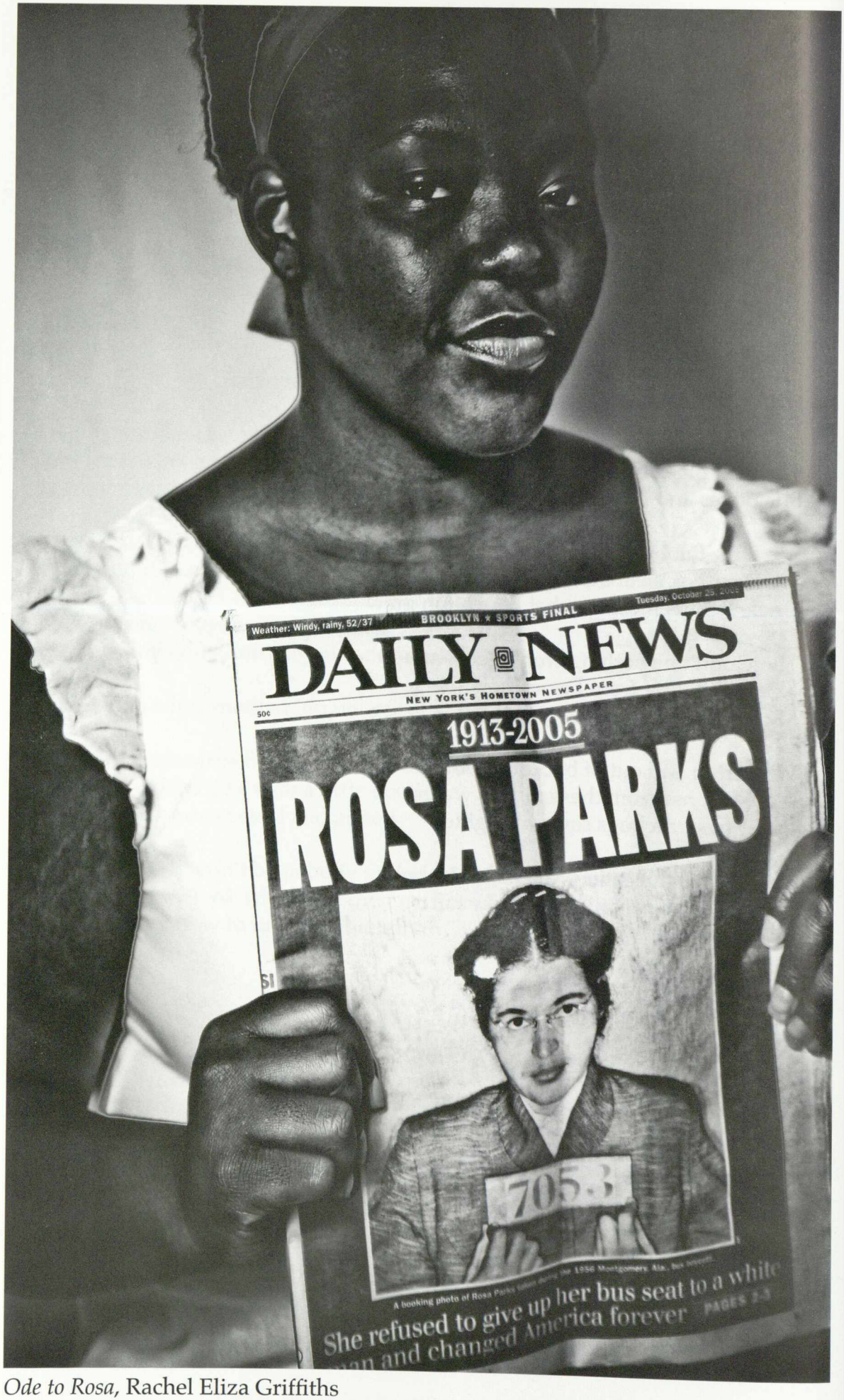
Kara's got a little something to say
With her black black paper cut-away
She pokes and poisons Master's way

See B'rer Rabbit cook her witch's brew
See B'rer Fox steal the changeling's stew
Uncle Remus hiccups what her cotton grew

There don't be nothing won't get spat up
None of us safe from her scissors touch
Mercy Mercy for a little girl's luck

Worked in and out of backdoor porches
Monsters rise from these murky waters
Paper hysteria hugs savage laughter

Someone in the gallery smells of alcohol
Dirty dreams a monkey's musky tail



Ode to Rosa, Rachel Eliza Griffiths

Lovesong

3:55pm at the 6th Avenue subway station

AMY YEE

It takes two seconds to fall in love
with the green skirt coming up the subway stairs
with the way it swirls above smooth knees
between arms hung low with shopping bags.
It is only us on the stairs, you coming up, me
coming down.

There's nothing between me and your darkest secret.
It's so easy to know you. I reach out and Oh
there it is, beneath your skirt, layered on bone—
Moss on warm stone—summer's moistness
in that crinkly hair throbbing on my fingers.

I inhabit you. I know you as your first
boyfriend did after three months of fumbling,
as your last one did before the fight that split you up.
You'll remember me after the others have faded.
It will be like now, you and me on the narrow stairwell,
your eyes glassy and wild
your lips spluttering shapeless sounds.
I smile at you lovingly.

It's our special moment, even as you clamber
back downstairs in those silly shoes that
don't let you walk
as you scream *Fuuuck yoouuuu!*
bouncing off the tiles
even your vowels
delicious.

The Body's Betrayal

from Fes is a mirror

CHANTAL JAMES

Me and a beggar have only one thing in common: that we both profit from people's need to escape their guilt. i'll give begging its due credit as its own profession: you take your particular physical affliction—your twisted limb, your palsy, your gaping wound—and parade it in the streets with your hand out. if you're an unmarried woman, i know a few neighborhoods where you can rent a child out; hug it to yourself, learn to look into the eyes of passerby with an intensity not to be mistaken for boldness.

i despise a beggar, though. me and You came up from nothing and we never had to ask for nothing we didn't deserve. when i first came to this city i had no name, no training, no trade. i was taking You with me everywhere, refused to leave You. Fes, the medieval city, crushed in on us from all sides. it stole the light of day, it cast a constant shadow even over an afternoon's brilliance.

we had rolled off the truck both smelling like wool. it was nighttime and suddenly we were in the city for the first time. Fes' walls stood stark against the sky and we found ourselves peering up at them, feeling like tiny insects. the walls made me think of giant anthills—masses of dust. they seemed on the verge of collapsing into enormous heaps of sand. later i learned that the city had been a fortress, had been impenetrable. now it was a skeletal homage to its former self, and it was wide open. maybe that's why i caught the feeling of being a soldier, of being an ancient enemy of the city, of sneaking up on it stealthy while it slept, even though i was just a boy, and You were keeping stride next to me: because maybe i wasn't the first boy soldier who'd tried to slip into Fes and maybe, in the eyes of a city like Fes with its thousands of people and thousands of years—even You weren't the first of your kind.

You and i walked; it was the only thing i could think to do. i had never seen a city before, not really, not unless i thought of the dusty towns i'd peeked at from beneath the carpet that day as cities—a hanout each, a mosque each, and each with its obligatory sleepy café where men with no teeth drank coffee in plastic chairs and a pretty girl with fat hands was pouring tea in a perfect crystal arc that a bit of sun glinted through.

we walked up stone steps outside the city's walls—i took your hand. You were always trusting of me and i've tried to pay You back for it the best i can, to give You the best kind of life in return. the trust You've put in me has been a gift. with it, i became something—where in the desert i'd had to surrender myself to sleep in the heat of mid-day just to keep from being obliterated by the sun, and i felt steadily that i was nothing. me and my family, we were mankind, and for mankind we pressed

in our turn, and it barely mattered what our names were, and it barely mattered who we thought we were—it mattered that we lived.

You and i walked past what i now know to be the tombs of kings, white graves, blue in the starlight, and they inspired a silence in us. the whole city was sleeping, and when Fes sleeps it's a monument to solitude—after all these years, it still makes me want to bow my own head not in sleep but in awe. we walked past the iron fence of a nice hotel whose open palm fronds were rustling in the wind. gates closed to us, but i squinted my eye so i could see past to the hotel's glimmering starry swimming pool, and further into its tall windows lit like portraits—inside a lady in a red-striped uniform with a pristine white cloth tied over her head pushed a mop over the floors, floors that shone like God's heaven, or something else forbidden to people like us.

up and up the old stone steps until we came to a broken stone wall, and leaned together against it. what was this city that even muted the stars? it was a power i wanted a piece of. the very night before, the stars in the sky above me had been clustered uncountably; but in the sky over Fes stars were spaced far apart, no more than fifty of them.

dizzy under this new kind of starlight we fell asleep against the wall, and we woke to the blinding sun between our eyelashes. we rose, and went back down the stone stairs, back past the hotel and its immaculate glass windows that in daylight glared the world outside back at itself, the white medina down the hill now shining, and all i could think, passing those clean windows, was that they wanted to be shattered—in a vision i saw them so, in jagged pieces reflecting the brilliant city in a thousand directions.

what i couldn't have realized in those first moments in Fes—as my boyhood was shaking off me like the grains of red sand i'd carried from home in the fibers of my clothing—was that the hallucinogenic heat of the desert was also rising off of me, shuddering off of me to leave me and never return. Fes gave fewer stars and it surrendered fewer of its dream-visions—until the world came to settle around me and to fix itself, no longer something that wavered and warped, a mirage on the horizon, the insect you thought you saw but you didn't see in the dust at your feet, the voice you thought you heard but didn't hear on the wind. not even now in the cold clarity of this jail, all of my senses piqued, do the simple visions of the desert return to me, not even here does time morph into that slow syrup that the unbearable sun used to melt it to when i was a kid. sometimes i still don't know whether it was the loss of my childhood or the loss of the desert—maybe it was only the reverberating aftershock of being hit with all Fes' force, a shock that echoes between your bones as long as you live to survive it.

if i'd arrived in Fes by myself, my future there might have taken a different course—maybe i would have taken up with a pack of boys my own age, followed them, foraged with them, fought with them when it got so cold that i needed to see someone's blood to remind myself there was still life under the earth and under the skin.

but i had You. whatever You were You were not a boy, and i knew that world—scrambling through the city at night like cockroaches—was not for You. if i was to live in that kind of world myself, i'd need to find You shelter from it.

so that day i found us our first home in Fes, a piece of cardboard in the Mellah, slanted against a corner in a dead-end derb. i told You to stay there, that the city was dangerous for You, and You obeyed me. i spoke to my first Fessi that day, a man who started a conversation with me on the street, whose language i couldn't understand. he laughed at the confusion on my face, and called me a name—i understood only the contempt behind it, not the word. i would have to learn the tongue of the city. and that day i chose a new name for myself, an Arab name for the Arab city. without a voice, i knew you would never reveal my origins.

in the days that we lived there i used to slip through the medina around lunchtime (when everybody was drowsy of sleep, fat-bellied, unfocused) to steal a loaf of bread and some oranges. i'd take it back to You—peel your orange for You and place each section into the palm of your hand, and with each piece of fruit i'd tell another story about what had happened that day.

i don't know my exact age even now, but i think i was fifteen or sixteen at that time. it was spring, so we were lucky. i had never experienced winter yet in my life. after i had, springtime always urged me to forget it, that cold in my bones—and it always recalled our arrival in the city, for me, the feeling of being free and loose in the world and the sense of power and responsibility You gave me. we came to Fes in the months before the sun begins to bear on you too hard, to press the juice out of you until you want to curse it. we fooled ourselves for a while, in the sun's mercy.

before that spring was over, i had abandoned stealing, and moved on to other things. it was because i'd nearly gotten caught one day. the man at the shop had turned from me when i swiped a loaf, but he turned back again too soon. i had started to ease away with the bread in my hand. he saw me. embarrassed, i walked back to him. i smiled at him, asked how much, though i knew that the price wouldn't matter. there was not a coin in my pockets—there never had been, and i had never handled money in my whole life up to that point. i placed the bread back at the top of the stack, where it was illuminated by a single hanging light bulb. from the back of the shop, the king's portrait stared at me disapprovingly.

i had built a tin lean-to for us and we had been living there for about a week, in an abandoned garden hidden deep in Geurniz. i didn't want to alert anyone to our presence, so i was afraid to plant much in the soil yet, though we sometimes ate the thin wild onions that we found growing there. but this was the second day in a row that i came home to You with nothing substantial to put into our bodies, and it would be the second night in a row we slept with our stomachs grinding in on themselves. i braced myself for the look of disappointment on your face, as you rose from your place and saw that i had nothing for You.

i'd thrown up a clear plastic tarp over the walls as our ceiling. the day's last light came trickling in like dirty water. You rose from the dust floor when i entered, looking concerned. i thought You must be able to sense that i had failed You again that day. but You were turning to look at the dust on the floor where you had been sitting, still impressed with your body. parts of the earth clumped together there with dark blood, your blood. You were confused and terrified. i had nothing to offer You.

i found the woman who begged outside a mosque nearby to show you what to do about woman-things.

i felt severed from You. i knew it was inevitable that You would betray me, and continue to betray me. You were not sexless.

Sheep in a woman's body, a body that would always betray You—i could not save You, from the consequences of your body.

Duel

RICHARD HAMILTON & HASANI JENNINGS

1

My brother yells, *How the hell*
you think I helped Nicole out, bought Christian
them shoes, paid for my apartment? I
Hustled. Wasn't workin, cuttin hair—that
ain't no real job. We're face-
to-face in a gravel parking lot. Tenor
talk out each broken window
falls on grave ears. I'm calm before
the change in pitch, the stand we take:

I know where I went wrong. I done
been to prison. Our conversation turns
silent. *But I have to do this.* There's drama
in stopping him. I don't. *I won't*
visit you behind bars, white noise.

2

Visit you behind bars, white noise.
Arms folded. Pregnant. *Ain't going*
to no funerals either. Then turning,
vanished with finality and poise.
I stared. Darkness standing where she was.
Door-slam. Shook my head. Finished counting.
Couple months, couple states west. Running.
Captured. Isolation. Her voice

echoed off steel walls in my mind
expecting no concern. She came.
Not pregnant. Forced a smile. Then another.
I brought up that night—her lines:
thick glass. Holes for talking. Our faces framed:
Despite and still, you're my brother.

3

Despite and still, you're my brother, has this certain
ring to it like we're pulling a wishbone
apart, balling the day thirty-three oranges
roll off a stainless steel counter right
into my lap. For each burnt moon, I count
suffering. Marry me to the marked smell
of a cadaver decomposing. Bury me with citrus
zest for each wrongdoing. Stake me to the blue-

orange flames, carrying my father's pain
medicine, death and acceptance.
Say there was a contaminated body
all those years locked-up in a self-
pickling jar. Counting moon
cycles before orange flowers bloom.

4

Cycles before orange flowers bloom.
Soaking in moist manure might
make sense then—when lush petals call
fat fuzzy bumblebees and glory
in May's breeze, but now osmosis
is the enemy. A balance
of pressures—to allow nutrients
but beat back the allure of rest
in surrender to this decay.

The sun hooked his winch to assure
I grow upwards. Torn from rotting
shell I reach for oranges and greens
of vertigo dreams. Bathed in yellow
I'll stand to sniff butterflies' butts.
This lonely stench will house my roots.

5

This lonely stench will house my root-
feeling—Jose, Sunday morning. Our hot
breath is a third-person inside a parked Ford
pick-up. Where real cheeks shake the floor
board of his '89, wrestling with the balance
of my youth. The grinding rotors, brake pads,
and low tale-pipe murmur. Each time a caution
light warmed the frosted rear-shield, we plot

our excuses. *Out doing last minute X-mas*
shopping for the wife and kids. Or, *fucked*
around in this weather and got stuck. Point being,
metallic-blue garland hung that night in cross-
stitched, drooping folds along a tree. Two brown
men, if the police ever pulled up. Not the exhale
from our throats that saved us. But burning winter.

6

Our throats that saved us. But burning winters.
Cursed embers. A cold walk home. Home's dark
ignition. He remembers Georgia pine cones hitting
his sister: gray jacket, head down, brown chips
in her black hair. Fall's deciduous, ablaze here and there.
The mobile commotion following, hurling
"KKK!" "Nigger!" "String her up!"
In doorways grown, white arms folded
approving. Condoning. Apathetic.

Then, they notice. "Her brother!"
He in 2nd; She and most of them in 6th.
His Peter moment. He could only manage
to save himself.
"I don't like her either."
They left him and never left him. Smoldering.

7

They left him and never left him smoldering
conjures dead presidents, coins we
flip over the black-hand-side. Shuffling
my ace in the hole times a wild turkey
in my open palm. Shriveled up gold
Trojans—heads or tails. Impermanent
        skin, lubrication. Kin
to confederate daughters, petticoats
and clement birds. Map out the train
of events that lead here. The falling
flowers / I saw drift back to the branch
were butterflies [1]. A truant hand the night,
        we compound—cake:
        red ballooning rite.

---

1 This sentence is a variation on Babette Deutsch's translation of Arikida Moritake's haiku, "The Falling Flower."

8

Cakes red ballooning rite.
I have the right not to remain
suffocating in the silence
of that night who created this

monster in spring of '86.
I wished a fall down Chi Ho's[2] steps
could break my neck,
but guessed bad luck.
Would leave me only paralyzed

sitting emotionless thru trial.
Eight years later, still that same child
hoping that same judge will at last
slay with gavel the beast she birthed.
Cruel monster left me breathing.

9

Cruel monster left me breathing.
So take the in breath. Take what's left
of your life and form a beeline from here
to Halifax if you have to. Life is
what it is: A suicide attempt gone

wrong. A walk through the graveyard
of your mind is all there is. Take that
last breath. Press your Dickie uniform.
Stage your death without attachment.

Say I'm here. Thick black chains
and gangrenous rooms, Mama.
With the exhale, we find our causes
near the red rose bud, unmarked head
stone of our mother's suffering.
waited on the steps.
then picked up the knife to finish slicing.

---

2 The name of a children's shelter in Huntsville, AL.

The Golden Wok

for Liu Jin Sheng

AMY YEE

After he saved enough money to open
The Golden Wok, he worked even more, never closed
so he could send for his wife and children.
They knew him with chalk in his hand, not ladle,
spatula that flashed, clanged on the wok
loud with oil and flame in summer's furnace.

Weeks before they arrived, three men
hit him and kicked him on an elevator
floor while making a delivery.
They took his watch, the bag of General Tso's chicken.
He heard bells in his head afterwards but
they left his hands and feet alone so he
could still cook and deliver.

He never told his wife. Instead he put
a small knife in his pocket. He didn't
think of it as he carried two heavy
bags filled with food toward the house
where a girl, about his daughter's age,
waited on the steps.

The boys leapt
from the bushes, threw
a grey blanket over his head. They held
his arms behind him, smothered his screams.

Food fell to the ground: cartons packed by his
son, wire handles dimpled to hold flaps
shut; wax bags with soy sauce, fortune cookie
packed by his daughter, neatly folded gift;
barbecued pork sliced by his wife on the
stained wood block.

He could not see the boy (fourteen, math whiz,
a violinist, the lawyer would say)
raise a brick, strike down again and again
even after the first blow crumpled skull.

The boy stood in a puddle of dark blood.
Panting, he said: "Eat, before it gets cold."

And they did, in the house, licking fingers
of chicken wings, beef lo mein, barbecued
pork sliced by a woman in an apron

at The Golden Wok -- brick contact paper
peeling, green order pad waiting. His wife watched
the minute hand of the lacquer clock (too
expensive, but bought for good luck). She laid
the cleaver down for a moment, wondered
what was taking her husband so long

then picked up the knife to finish slicing.

The Triumph of Montefeltro

GINA M. TABASSO

Women in finery sit on a flat cart's edge
as if on the way to the gallows, the stake,
the block, rather than to market.
They go to buy and sell, keep family afloat,
meet the news that took weeks to arrive.
They gather skirts, worry the fabric
edged in mud, manure, the stink of sewer.
Disease rides their swish, hides in the folds
until the next babe dies, the old man grows sick –
the covering of flies, thick.
By a trick of light an angel is gone
before it arrived, leaves roses scattered
to dry for sachets that keep the scent of rot away.
As if the ground they tread is grave
rather than road going one way
or a jaunt to the park, the doctor comes
with leeches to bleed their humors.
They never smile, are stalked by time,
soldiers who want to impress upon their thighs.
These women have much to sigh over,
mop and sweep, but have given the nursing
of their young to other breasts.
In time of war, they are on even ground,
have more to sell before despair takes hold.
One among them will not starve or be taken.
She knows how to do herself in.
As they round the bend, they will find her
hanging from a cherry tree in bloom.

Defining "Womanly Powers"

Actress Victoria Rowell gives back to the women who raised her

Besides her roles of actress, activist, mother, and wife, Victoria Rowell is the author of New York Times extended bestseller *The Women Who Raised Me.* Her book is a tribute to the foster care system and the women who nurtured her into womanhood. Born in Portland, Maine, Rowell found her niche in ballet, through which she learned principles of survival. Eager to know how a young girl transcended such heart-wrenching experiences with such grace and poise, *Aunt Chloe* spoke with Rowell about the many obstacles she surmounted to become the woman and role model she is today.

Aunt Chloe: In your book you talk about the "womanly powers" that the women who raised you were encouraged to suppress. Tell me, how do you define "womanly powers?"

Victoria Rowell: We all are born with it. It's called women's intuition. It's all about the pelvic bone. That feeling we get when we're amidst danger, if we have to think twice about something, it's always the first voice that tells us and we go against it and that's when we get into trouble. So, that is that clarification.

AC: How do you embrace your womanly powers, now?

VR: It's interesting. We are all born perfectly turned out in terms of ballet. Our knees flop open. We're so flexible. We're so malleable in every way, bodily, spiritually. We become tighter and tighter and tighter as we get older due to our experiences. We become more guarded. We have to reopen ourselves and I believe, in terms of speaking on behalf of women and my own experiences, I have learned to embrace what I was born with. However, I must say, I've always stayed attached, I've always used it. I always stayed attached to that space above my pelvic bone. And remember how powerful that space is. That is the birth canal. That is where every person sits and waits to be born, whether you're taken by C-section or you come down the vaginal canal—that is where creation ends and begins. And women should pay more attention to their power with that understanding. Stay rooted in that understanding.

AC: What are some of the obstacles you face(d) as a woman in the entertainment industry? How have you overcome these barriers?

VR: *[laughs]* I was just talking about that today. I've experienced a lot. And one of the things I learned from the women who raised me is to be courageous and

and at the same time be a strategist. So, be a courageous strategist. Which is to say that black and white, all women—obviously white women have more opportunities than women of different ethnicities—but all women have to learn to navigate the corporate system very stealthily. And clearly, since you have read the book, you know that I was pulled by such women. That is to say that when I was met up against obstacles which were plentiful, I stayed rooted in the work because I saw the bigger picture. And when people ask me, not only in the entertainment industry, "how have you been able to have such longevity in that industry?" I will say that I have kept my eye on the prize and saw the bigger picture. It's not the day-to-day that makes you successful; it's the tenured work. It's building the relationships. And you cannot build brick by brick if you're building from the top down. So if somebody, let's say, takes your parking spot because they think you have preferential treatment. Or, let's say you're referred to as the black girls, you're called out of your name. Or, let's say someone spits on you in a scene to try to get away with it and call it a theatrical improvisation, knowing that they're protected by ART [American Repertory Theatre], you have to, as I have had to, quickly decide which side of that piece of dental floss I'm going to jump on to. The world does break down in black and white. And so, it is not the same. It is not the same. There is a double standard.

AC: As a woman of mixed ethnicities, how have you learned to overcome those barriers?

VR: I'm European and African. Let's be specific in terms of mix. Yeah, I don't feel mixed. I don't feel mixed up. I feel…I mean, it's not a feeling. The DNA is African and European.

AC: I get this feeling from you through reading your book that you've come to terms with who you are. You love who you are and embrace you.

VR: I've never come to terms. It just is what it is. More than half the people in this country either don't want to know their true ethnicity or don't want to face the history of this country. The past is prologue. The way that African slave women were raped—we could go off the tongue of so many people and find out what their DNA make-up is and see what they really are. And there are so many people who appear to be European that aren't. So in terms of being mixed race, aren't we all? We could take that argument right over to Spain and Italy and Africa…a boat ride way. It's not how we get here, it's what we do when we get here.

AC: After the death of Bertha C. Taylor [early childhood foster mother whom you had a special relationship with], you received a precious gift that she had preserved for many years in loving memory of you – a lock of your baby hair. Of all keepsakes, why do you think she chose to keep your hair?

VR: The DNA. She didn't expound it that way, but you cherish what you can have. That's an ancient practice. It's not unusual, in my opinion. I never questioned why these three women made a pact to cut that curl. That's an ancient

practice. It's in African artwork. It's in spiritual rituals. It's practiced all over the world because it holds the DNA of that person. Whether we scientifically understand that or not, I think, intrinsically, it transcends science. It's on a molecular level that people understand that they are holding in their hand a part of someone, dead or alive…they're connected. It's a relic.

AC: Do you still have it?

VR: Oh, of course! I have hair of some of the women who raised me.

AC: As a child, you admired Agatha's ability to withstand great pain, something you say you learned how to do later in life. What is the secret to, as you state best, "channel[ing] away pain"?

VR: Well, Agatha taught us to pray for other people. She always prayed for other people. She always gave what little she had. She always made a contribution to children in other parts of the world, to charity of some sort worldwide, whether it was CARE or UNICEF. She always believed in that and took care of children domestically. Now, she understood the transformational power of offering up your pain, which was essentially meditating and sending…well, I don't want to get too abstract about it. Agatha suffered a radical mastectomy, many ailments, including being in a body cast for twelve months as a child after she broke her back—she understood the gravity of pain. And you have to get to another plane to be able to live with that pain and not be on drugs. There were no pain killers. She found the transformational power of prayer. And part of her prayer was, she channeled her pain to [pray for] people who she believed were worse off than she was. She taught us that and it's been an extraordinary gift because anyone can do it. And it's not just physical pains, its mental pain. There's always someone who is suffering more than you are. And it gets you out of your head, and it gets you out of 'woe is me' and people should try it because it does work. It worked for her.

AC: As a ballerina, you mentioned how dance helped you to channel pain because "physical struggle was a part of learning how to dance." At this point in your life, what does ballet mean to you?

VR: Well, I want to say that art is therapeutic for all people. Any form of art or form of education that you're passionate about is therapeutic. It releases endorphins and naturally gets you to a high that you can't get any other way. I staunchly advocate embracing your passion, whether it's writing, or dancing, or music, or science, or nature, hiking, poetry, carving—what ever it is—that is your God-given gift. What dance means to me today is not just dance. Dance gave me the world. Dance means travel. It means different languages and cultures. It means different foods. It means different music. It means tolerance and embracing. It means pain, suffering and beauty. No gain without pain. It means everything. Because when you go into something and you think that's going to be your path you will find that there will be revealed to you many paths as a result of following your truth. So dance means life to me…a way of life.

AC: Is writing about your life as a ballet dancer as exhilarating for you as actually dancing?

VR: Well, it's a different kind of exhilaration. You're documenting your history. It was exhilarating because I was trying to enclose the disparity between black and white dancers. And there's still a disparity. But thank god we have a variety of glorious dancers out there, namely Misty Copeland, who's a soloist for the American Ballet theatre right now.

AC: Your aunt Marion Wooten put her dreams of becoming an accomplished pianist on hold to care for her family. What has been your greatest sacrifice in life?

VR: I have a family and take a nine to five in acting—that would be daytime television. As you know, I've done a lot of films, most recently with Samuel Jackson, and throughout my career, I've been asked and still get asked, "Why don't you do more movies?" And I said, well, I chose family because family was paramount to me.

AC: Some time after your Aunt Joan's husband committed suicide, leaving her with children to raise on her own, she told you, "the best medicine is learning how to laugh." What was the last thing you laughed heartily about?

VR: My book! My new book! I had a huge laugh yesterday. I'm coming to the end of my first novel, which is called Secrets of a Soap Opera Diva. And it's heartbreaking and it's hilarious and it is fiction about a daytime diva's journey being on a soap opera. That's where I got that idea from. It's going this month to publishers.
I learned the business aspect about what I'm doing. And a writer must keep track of their sales. You can't depend on a royalty statement; you gotta keep track of your sales and be about the business as well as the writing of a book, especially as a black writer. The audio book is in my voice. And it is available for sale very soon this year.

AC: I hear you have a fiftieth birthday coming up in May.

VR: Oh, I do! Fabulous at fifty and a wedding. And you'll love this. I get married on June 27th to an Atlanta man. His name is Radcliffe Bailey.

AC: Congratulations! I'm sure you will receive many amazing gifts this season. Speaking of which, you explain the "joy of giving" as something you learned from the women who raised you. What is the greatest gift you've given?

VR: I think the greatest gift I have given is correspondence. Correspondence. Because you can't always give a hug. Because we no longer live in a society where you live down the block from so-and-so or down the road. And so the women who raised me always wrote to me and I wrote back to them. And I still

write to people because even in this "mediacracy" where we're going at lightening speed with Blackberrys and texting and computer space—we're going a million miles an hour. There's nothing like a handwritten note and a card. And so I feel like the greatest gift I have given is contact. You don't have to stay in touch every week. We're not talking about doing the impossible. We're not talking about being a martyr. We're talking about reaching out to your mentors, the people who helped you—friends, extended family, family, teachers—letting them know that they mattered, that they still matter. That's the greatest gift that I've given, staying in touch. And letting people know that they mattered.

AC: In your book, you write, "I was starting to see that 'forever' didn't exist, and, whether I embraced change or not, it was heading my way." What does Barack Obama's election mean to you?

VR: President-elect Barack Obama embodies a positive message, I want to think, for every person, not only domestically, but around the world. The possibilities are infinite: that if you can think it and work for it, you can have it honestly. And I think that we have this extreme example of juxtaposition of a financial collapse due to extraordinary greed, and then you have this favorite son of the world who is from the mother land by way of his father. Who represents the best that we can be. This is a big change. He's not only going to bring about domestic healing, he's going to bring about global change. And global uniting. When I go to D.C., it won't just be me; I'll be flanked by all the women who raised me, all the women who couldn't vote because of the color of their skin, all the women, black or white, who were met with injustice on a whole myriad of circumstances. I will be flanked by my mothers and the women who raised me and we will celebrate all together in spirit.

Dear Celie

RACHEL ELIZA GRIFFITHS

One day I found you
lying facedown
in a bride-stain of indigo

the work field afire
with lilac torches

wildflowers brimming
in God's mouth

Some nights
in a field of silk-
petal teeth
I found you
lying there
with the sweetgrass
humming in your eyes

Shug's bee &
hive

Oaks knelt
beneath cross winds

Cotton blew white-
stringed breath
into dry miseries
where nets broke

& such plagued
frogs never leapt

One day Celie
the Bible
was like a torn moth
flung to earth it self

through which the light
of womanhood
spilled through

& then these colored folk
words unhooked

an empty space
through which old mercy
shimmied some lavender scent
gone dogbite crazy

the way Sofia did
when her neck
rejected a heifer's leash
laughing at

the very idea—

One day Celie
I want to find you
singing

I want to see
a smile knock
at each door
in your mouth

until somebody
answer us

I want to find you
speaking
your amethyst life

& shaking
your sparkle Celie

you can't fit a tree frog
into a woman hewn
from a flock
of battered humming
birds

don't let Mister
keep your hide company
with belts & backhanded
psalms

One day Celie
I found God
wearing a robe
of plums

I found God

singing
a blues
so deep
it was burgundy

I found God
dreaming above
the work field

where you my sister
had lain

your life down
among the fallen
petals & razors

no more
cutting & sowing

misery's seeds
that don't taste
like nothing

not even
the color of
your sister's
falling rain

not even of
our missing

our missing
the girls we was

girls beneath
a wildflower
God

(For Alice Walker)

What the Doll Says to Claudia MacTeer

RACHEL ELIZA GRIFFITHS

This afternoon you broke
my head from the neck. Fingers
unloosed seams along my back,
ripping out the Mama-mama box.
I couldn't thank you enough.
Spittle frothed the edges of your lilac
lips. Attempt to destroy what isn't in me.
Brown fingers pressed into my wide blue
eyes. Sight no more or less innocent
than yours. Two feet stomped away
my nose. Pain in your toe did not stop
you from smiling. With bared teeth
you pulled the glue and black fringed eyelashes
away from my sockets. When the hard marble
eyes popped out, you scooped them up,
shoving jewels into your nappy pocket.
You ripped my curls out by the roots.
I didn't make any of this: the cotton
your great-great grandmother reaped,
tumbled out of me. You will be beaten.
They will not give you this gift again
unless you promise to love me as they do.
This ain't mine, is all you'll say.
Your mother called you in.
I stay out in the trees until another
finds me, puts me back together
so I'm me. At dinner your tongue
searches your gums for the taste of
toy blood.

(For Toni Morrison)

Consolata Dreams of Risa

RACHEL ELIZA GRIFFITHS

"She entered the vice like a censored poet whose suspect
lexicon was too supple, too shocking to publish."
Toni Morrison, *Paradise*

I'll take you to this city, Risa, & we can live safely.
Never crying again over our spilled blood. Bring aloe.

Here, sterile smells of Mercurochrome & iodine
clean alleys where spilled misery lingers. Makes judiciary rainbows.

Your name, Risa, floated up through a park I was carving yesterday
near my knees. A blade sometimes a widow's mouth.

I live in their world but I exist here. Silent, serene enough
my wounds have no boundaries. Scabs mark
the territories of a woman's war.

Beg for neutrality, treaty & truce. I'll name a park & school
for you, Risa, when all the flooding has stopped. Not enough
tissue to catch this new blood.

Foster boy from Mama Greer's home found this country
by accident when I was a baby girl. Trying to get himself into me,
he dragged the jeans down my hips 'til the safety pin broke.

Etched a fine jag of blood along my stomach. Pink flower on my panties
made him lose his breath. His thing get big. Why
do most people forgive accidental wounds easier?

Now I make love in the dark. Keep the electricity off
so lovers don't see my kingdom. Call it a scab. Name me a ruin.

Risa, you know how to do it too? Wield control like a ghost
with skeleton keys to a city of blood. Here's a blade that keeps
the peace.

(For August Wilson)

"*Look*. Look at This": An Interview with Rachel Eliza Griffiths

Aunt Chloe: I've noticed that you have a lot of historical references in your poems, and also literary references. Does the news inspire you to write poems?

Rachel Eliza Griffiths: Some things in the news inspire me to write. I'll see certain stories, and you know the news, they have these very blanket quotes or leads sometimes—those will resonate for me. I know when Hurricane Katrina was being reported and brought to us, mostly for me, through the television, I just ended up writing down so many things, and not with the idea that I would make poems from them, just that I was incredibly upset, angry, moved. I have a poem called "Hymn to the Hurricane" where I saw a news clip of a man who had to make a choice between his wife or his son and his wife helped to make the choice by letting go of his hand telling him to take the boy, and their house was split completely in half, physically, by water and she let go. And they showed this news clip of him trying to talk and they kept showing the boy who was devastated. It was just so haunting to me. A poem started from that, but it wasn't a conscious thing, like, "this is what I want to write poems about." I think Patricia Smith has a poem in *Blood Dazzler* out of many of those poems that are so raw and stunning, but she has a poem called "34" that I first heard at Bar 13 through the Louder Arts Poets and I think she had started writing it on an ATM receipt on her way to Louder Arts, I think that's what she said. But when she read that poem, it just broke me open, and I went home and I started thinking about that. I can't remember if I had started writing a poem before I heard that poem, but when I think about Hymn to the Hurricane, I think about a lot of poets who were responding and trying to help.

I also wrote a poem about the woman the woman Megan Williams who was kidnapped in West Virginia and tortured. That struck me unbelievably. And later ended up becoming a poem.

AC: What news media do you read?

REG: Newspapers, magazines, I'll read things online; occasionally, I'll read a blog. I like journals and magazines, I like things that I can hold and look at in my hands. But I'm also online pretty often, looking around. I usually will go more than one place for something, especially if I start to think I'm going to write a poem, I'll try to gather as many different accounts of what happened, and sift through them until I feel like I can kind of start to write something about it. Sometimes, it's an intuitive reaction like Hurricane Katrina. I didn't have to look around for anything; it was right in front of me.

AC: What stories are of most interest to you?

REG: I think it depends on the story; I think it depends on what's at stake. For example, this morning, I read a story—this NFL player was pulled over by a police officer, and he explained that his mother-in-law was dying, like, at that minute, was dying, and that's why he had gone through the traffic light. And the police officer, I think actually drew his gun at this guy who turned out to be an NFL player, his wife was in the car, his father-in-law was in the car…so things like that, I really start to think. And apparently, the mother-in-law ending up dying, and had this police officer not done this, he may have been able to get inside and pay his last respects. That's very haunting to me. Those kinds of situations.

A couple of weeks ago I remember on the Cave Canem listserv, someone sent a link around of a young girl who was pepper-sprayed by police, and kind of roughly arrested. And I remember being really troubled by what I was seeing. I think it was a YouTube clip or something of it but then my mind will go to other stories, too. I'm very sensitive to nature and wildlife. Stories about whales, or endangered animals will interest me, too. During President Obama's campaign, I was really every day reading the paper, just reading every single possible thing I could., different stories from all over the country and even internationally, about the reaction to his campaign, and his running. I would read several different papers every day and I'd watch things on television. I try to just look at as many things as I can. I've been looking at the conflict over in China with the monks, and Darfur…I guess I'm always interested in dignity and transgressions of that and also people fighting for it and insisting on it. so stories where that is clearly an issue will really resonate with me. But I also like stories about art, different exhibits, and photographs, or paintings. Or things that artists are doing—I'm always interested in that.

AC: You mentioned Megan Williams. Could you talk a little bit about the intersection of art and politics? I know you have a lot of poems with a lot of political leanings and a lot of history, but they're still very well-crafted. How do you go about writing those poems?

Well, I think there was one thing you mentioned in your question just now—you mentioned craft. To me, that is one of the most important things for me as far as when I'm writing a "political poem." It's intuition, intelligence, craft, perspective. I think also for me it's often about empathy. I tend to be very—or I like to think I tend to be very empathic with everything around me. And so I guess I never really thought of my poems as being political in the way another poet's work might be—but they are. They're about resistance in a way, even some of the nature poems. I've had people come up to me after readings and say, "You wrote about nature, or you wrote about a Greek myth but it seemed very political." It is there. I believe strongly in not living in a glass bubble and if you are in a bubble, you have a trap door where you jump out, and you connect with the world—you have to. But that there has to be a balance. Because I also can tend to be a little solitary; but when I see things around me that make me angry, or upset me and trouble me, it makes me question the dynamics of the larger world. And it's just hard for me to ignore it. I absorb so much. When I was in grad school at Sarah Lawrence, there was an anthology that was put together about the life of Ken Saro-Wiwa—that comes to my mind suddenly as some of the more political kind of work about a person's life, but it was the life that struck me, and then to try to actually as an artist, inflect something to that, in my own very small way, of course, you know, someone like that—he gave his life for his beliefs. I think I have a range as a poet.

I have poems that are very political, in a sense, and then others where you have to dig a little bit more to see what the politics is. And it may be a personal politics, it may be a more political, social politics, or a cultural politics, or a sexual politics, because I think the word "politics" in itself can be very elastic depending on who you're talking to. But I think what I don't do is cut myself off and say "I don't write political poetry" or "That's all I write is political poetry." If it presents itself to me and there's something there, then I'll write about it. I just was stunned when I read the Megan Williams story. It just—I didn't right away say, "I'm going to write a poem." But as I started reading more details about the case and really trying to think about it in my mind, I really couldn't imagine it for a while, and then I started to—I started to think about it. And then fragments of a poem began in my head. I have a lot of quiet poems, too, where they have a politics in them—it's just not as overt.

AC: How much do you write about yourself? Personal poems?

REG: I guess almost every poem has a part of me in it…I have some poems that are very personal to me, I mean, they're not confessional or anything like that—they might be about an experience or something I had that I felt the *I* in the poems should speak, but I tend to just kind of look around me and be more interested in what's going on around me. It's always going to be my perspective that comes through the poem, in a way, even if it seems removed, it's still my way of seeing or looking at something. And I have some poems that are very, very personal and they're directly personal, and others, for example, the ones that tend to be kind of political, that are still very personal to me. Usually, I feel like I have to have a good reason to make a poem an *I* kind of poem; that I really have to have something that I think is worth sharing. I've been in situations where you're sitting and listening to someone read, and the *I* is larger than life. But then there are poets where you're so grateful and so glad that they did chart their personal lives and their personal matters and their histories and their family and their relationships or experiences that they had, because you can learn so much. And you're connected, in a way, to their personal narratives. I mean, a part of me thinks I haven't been in the world long enough to do that justice. But then at the same time, I've had my own unique experiences in the world, so far. I'm sure in the future, I'll write more about that, but right now, it seems like I've done more kind of like imaginative, persona poems or poems about art or political poems or nature poems. But, whether I'm overtly there or not, I'm still always present in my own poems…I guess it would be strange to estrange myself from that presence in a way.

AC: Which presence?

REG: The presence a poet has in his or her own poems that makes it his or hers. Some poets do this very well, where it seems like it's almost a disembodied voice, that is like a collective voice, but ultimately, it's still one person who was writing that poem. I kind of insist on being present in my own poems, whether it's an *I* kind of persona poem or not.

AC: You said instead of writing personal poems, you like to "look around." Do you think that's related to your love of photography?

REG: Absolutely…I never forget when I'm looking at photographs that it's me who's adjusting the shutter, and the aperture, and the light, and hitting the button that will take the image that I want; But I definitely think there's some kind of relationship between photographer and that manifestation of that in my poems. Recently, a poet friend of mine said that "I notice that in a lot of your poetry, there's always the presence and contrast of light and shadow in your poems." And I hadn't even thought of that. If I look back, that's definitely true. The kind of framing that you do in photographs I think I do that in my poems, too, and kind of a mood. Depending on what I'm photographing—with portraits, for example—although I want to get something from the person I'm working with, I also realize it's a conversation and it's a collaboration….I want to be fully in the moment. I want the person I'm looking at—I want us to be doing something different. There are so many different dynamics going on and one of the most important things to me is that the person is very aware that I'm there. Although it's tricky, because at the same I want them to not be self-conscious. So in a poem, I am there, but at the same time, I'm saying, "*Look.* Look at this." Or "think about this with me." I walk down the street with my camera and I'm looking through this viewfinder, and there are all these different things coming—people's moods, and light, and noise—and it's like a submersion. and I feel so alive, but at the same time, all of my focus is in this process of seeing the detail, and the use of detail in my poems is very connected to the way I'll see a detail when I'm taking a photograph. Whether it's a portrait, or if I'm doing street photography; it's like an accumulation of all these things coming together, in this somewhat crafted, but also somewhat mystical, magical kind of sense. And I like that in poems, too. I like when I read a poem, and there's a mood and it's kind of elusive for me. I just find that really interesting. So I think for me, as poet, photographer, painter—all of these things blur sometimes. And it's kind of going with what will be the best voice for what I want to communicate. And sometimes in a poem, it's the *I*, or the persona of me in the poem that is best, and sometimes, it's best for me to almost "zoom out" and be distant, on what I want to show more attention or focus. It's so interesting, because the words overlap, even the language.

AC: Do you have poems that you've written about photographs, or photographs you've taken that were inspired by your poems?

REG: I'm starting to do that more. I have some projects in mind, where I'll do that and I hope in the future to kind of do…*[laughs]* almost like collaborations with myself? But I'm also hoping, of course, to do collaborations with other artists, where there's a collage of poem and image, in conversation. There's a small journal called *dear camera*, that is doing a—they're using several of my images, and I also wrote poems that go along with those images. They're very kind of surreal, dream-type images, and the poems kind of reflect that. And that's one of the first times I've really done that. I have had other poets use images of mine and write poems, because they sent me the poems, and asked to use the photograph during their reading or something to go with the poem. And that's been really exciting. I love

working with other artists. I think it's so important—for everyone. It's kind of like a greater good thing. But I haven't explored it yet, in the way I hope to.

I'm working on this Cave Canem project, portraits of the Cave Canem community. Both an artistic and an archival collection.

AC: Are you doing everybody?

REG: That's my goal, to try to photograph as many members of the community as possible. I hope to photograph all the elders, and the faculty, and as many of the fellows as I can. Some of them, of course, I won't be able to, because we've lost fellows who have passed away. And some fellows are kind of in remote locations, and I'm not sure if I'll be able to reach them. But I'm really going to make the effort to try, because I think it's important. Last summer, I rented a van, and I threw a lot of my equipment in there, and I was going to Cave Canem as a poet, but I also wanted to start the stone rolling for this project, to see what would happen. And so I got an empty room, in one of the buildings at the retreat. And what would happen was that I had a schedule, and I would have poets come and sit for portraits. I see this project as being kind of a Van Der Zee, or Carl Van Vechten kind of perspective in the same way that the great poets of the Harlem Renaissance were photographed. I guess I'm having a call-and-response echo of that in trying to photograph the Cave Canem community. But what would happen was, I'd have fellows come. Some of them would come by themselves, others would come as groups. I always had music on; I'd ask people, "What do you want to hear?" because music is so important for me; and during the actual sitting, the music helps us get into this space immediately the way that conversation or talking doesn't. Which I think in a way, sometimes poems do that, too. And I think the most popular singer was Nina Simone. Almost half the fellows asked for Nina Simone. There were a lot of requests for Billie Holliday and Miles Davis. Toi Derricotte asked for Billie Holliday, and we had a great session. But when that music would come on, you'd see the shift in mood. The thing with Cave Canem poets is that we're so expressive and there's so much there. So fellows would come, and I'd ask them to wear white or black clothing and I had this space and lights set up, and I would do this until two or three in the morning. And then I'd have to get a poem of my own written by ten for workshop all day. But it was like this adrenaline…I couldn't even sleep when I needed to, because I was just so excited. And, you know, the Cave Canem poets in general tend to be really beautiful. So you have all these diverse faces and looks, and voices. Even as poets, it's not a homogenous situation of poets. You have very, very diverse poetic voices, poetic presences.

So I'd have people come. And I'd say, "What do you think?" So it's this whole conversation, collaboration. So people would come in and say, "I want to put paint on my body" I'd be like, "Cool. Do that." And we'd get out paint. Then someone would say, "I see you have some string over there…I want to wrap myself up with string." And then you'd have people who were more quiet. So that photograph of the women on the stairs, that was just incredible. You had all these different voices, different views, all coming together. It went straight to the heart, we didn't even have to talk much; they just went into this grace, and I just felt glad to get them.

It was so wonderful. I remember the day so clearly. Their presence—the way they were with each other, and the way they were with me. I don't think I could ever write a poem about it—but my poem is my photograph. They would just try different things, and they would really look.

Some people would write me and say "This photograph you took of me—I don't get to see my face this way in my usual life. I never look the way that I look here, you got something. Thank you." And I just had so many different experiences. Poets would come say, "Hey, would it be okay if for us to just come watch you do this? We won't make noise, we just want to watch." I'd look around and there'd be like, Nina Simone on, or Billie Holliday or something great. I look at around at these poets sitting, and they're in it, too. We're all having this collaboration, we're all in it together. It was just fantastic. *[laughs]* I just get so excited about it. It was such an incredible experience. I'm returning this summer to the retreat just to work on these photographs. And I'm twice as excited as I was last summer, when it was kind of this, "let's just see what would happen." Now I have some more ideas about some things I want to do. I have more toys to play with, as far as that goes. But it's really about a certain kind of simplicity, and with some of the poets, it's like their look is this old, old, ancient look. And you don't know what time they're from. And I think that's one of the things that's important to me. Because poetry is like that in a way. The project is called Cave Canem: Ars Poetica. So the whole idea of ars poetica, and then these portraits or these voices of poets, and faces. I'm really excited. To sit with the faculty and photograph has just been incredible. It's kind of like a national presence, because when I am starting to plan my trip, I'm realizing I'll have to travel to New England, I'll have to travel to the west coast, to seek the poets out, because they're everywhere. It's something that's important. As a poet, and also as a photographer, it kind of has a lot of possibilities to evolve into other things. And I like that, too. And I know a lot of the poets wrote about their experiences. I've just been grateful that this exists the way that it does.

Jena, Louisiana

for Robert Bailey, Jr., Mychal Bell, Carwin Jones, Bryant Purvis, Theo Shaw, Jesse Ray Beard

TARA BETTS

Noose turns epithet.
Slurs, a bread that rises
into red leap. Southern
heat thaws time, drains
the school of race.

Parent whisper is criminal & cry.
Hell is ajar as prison door.
Stunt entertains pale slap
to cinch brown boys,
ebb their hope, woo their murder,
shatter them in airless cells,
stamp mothers with ash & shade.

Lawyers must win, stop the pyre
with brothers for timber.
No one's a slave, raw as history's rope.
Who raises the stone of conspiracy
pressed down on sons?

Pitbull paws will score their
chests unless we jeer, swarm
around the shawl heavy as steel.
We become new sum where
three times two is one.

The Palestinian RN

CINDY CHILDRESS

Holds not a syringe, but a shovel
scooping crumbs of cement
aside in the hospital parking lot--
she must dig a bigger hole to slide too many bodies into.
Empty the morgue, refill the morgue,
refill the consecrated parking lot
with the stench of bullet holes filling a nurse's nostrils;
her hands hold the feet of a 21 yr old American mother
of one small boy locked in a child-restraint seat
when she was shot, pulled her car to the curb
pulse answering
cacophonous screams
from the child and a belated siren,
blood pooling on the ambulance's floor
as it made one more trip
to one more site
of damaged collateral
amassing piles of white gowns
gorging the gaping parking lot
full of bodies in graves
dug by hands trained to heal.

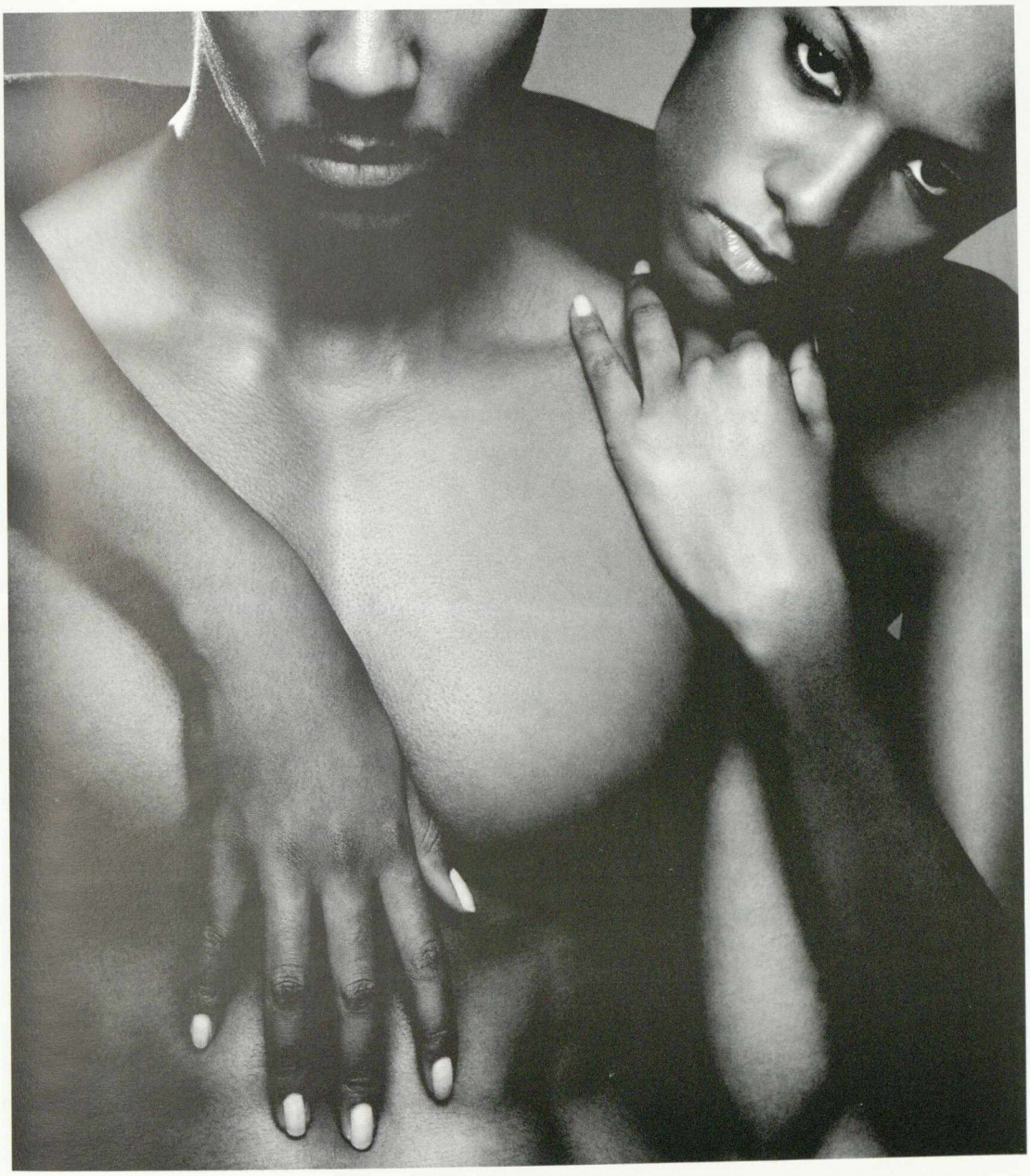
Seven of Wands

ELLEN COONEY

mail comes daily
for speedy Internet access
and ads for credit cards
the shopping center drops ads
at our front gate for hot dogs
and lite beer across the street
preachers scream the end of the world
beggars accost everyone TV's from
the neighbors blast laxative ads

we are oblivious

we have no computer
no TV
no newspapers
no car
no credit cards
all day you practice fencing
all day I read and write poetry
only the letter S separating us
swordplay wordplay
at times we go to the park out the
back where we avoid the street
when someone asks the time
we ask the century



C-leen's hands, Mamedy Doucara:

Tiger Creek, South of Aguila, Arizona

JEFFREY C. ALFIER

It's early October. The twilight sun
releases the hours to a damp stillness
running lambent over the cooling ground.
My grandson, heedless of the failing light,
scoops small handfuls of sand over his legs,
his seven-year old mind playing wildly.

Out here, I think of Sundog, a rancher
who died four days shy of turning fifty.
While we'd sat and spoke on this very spot
he said he wanted a green burial –
just a pine box, and his Baptist preacher,
the drunk who kept the faith he never could.

As light's spent, and wind gathers speed and dust,
I coax my grandson out of his whimsy.
He laughs, runs homeward, leaving me behind
like sand I'll end up washing from his shoes.

All the News

J.B. MULLIGAN

History comes between ads.
Perfect teeth in the box of a head.

A narrative of images
vivid and distorted,
a drunken dwarf
mumbling.

It's real because
we're told it's real.

"Amazing, Holmes.
And where was the door?"
Thump.
"Let me help you up,
Dear Watson."

Battles in a bar without walls,
where the barmaids snicker
as they steal each other's tips.

We stagger out together
pissing on each other's shoes.
"Damn, it's raining."
"So it is, Holmes."

German

PAUL HOSTOVSKY

I thought it sounded strong, impressive, Germanic,
to say: "I have to go to German now." I imagined
my friends all staring admiringly at my back
as I walked industriously down the tessellating hallway
to German, my posture slightly straighter, my rucksack
slightly heavier with Dieter and Petra in there dialoging
about Bratwurst and Goethe and Turkish guest workers.
I could recite "Der Erlkoenig" by heart, and my r's
were perfect drum solos. Nancy Baum sat in the seat in front of me
and pretended not to hear when I whispered: *Ich liebe dich*
into her umlaut—that pair of moles on her left earlobe.
I thought it sounded romantic, Germanic, productive
as a cough. Frau Spier thought so too, for she asked me
to repeat it for the benefit of the whole class. Nancy's
earlobes blushed then, and her umlaut looked
like two watermelon seeds. Later that semester
I translated one of Rilke's sonnets to Orpheus,
the one about the tree and the ear. My translation
employed an umlaut where no previous translator
had ever thought to. I thought it was brilliant, subtle,
Orphic and romantic. I published it in our high school lit mag
and waited. I waited twenty years. Then, suddenly,
there she was in front of me again, with her back to me
at the reunion, lifting a mixed drink to her lips with a slender
ringless hand at the bar, the umlaut right where I'd left it.
I whispered: *Ich liebe dich,* and she turned around, the wall
finally down. She was smiling a smile as wide as East and West.

Reconnaissance

PAUL HOSTOVSKY

He couldn't stop looking
at his wife's photograph
from long ago,
her school picture
in which she was only 12
and had no body,

only a head
and a neck, a red
shirt collar opening
onto the invisible country
that was just beginning
to develop below the border.

Here his imagination
pitched its tent. Here
the scouts of his eyes
kept returning

to her eyes,
the facts of them,
which hadn't changed at all
in all that time.

And here was her mouth
which he had kissed
a hundred million times

before he kissed it once,
a girlish smile
playing at the lips
some game of its own
imagining.

Nectarines, Ohio

JASON MYERS

My Spanish laxatives let loose,
        my armadillo hideaway hidden.
A dream of snakes means you're thinking of snakes.
        A dream of sex means you're thinking of snakes.

He's fucked this country,
        my father says of the president,
and I imagine him – the president, not my father –
        positioning himself at the rear
of America and thrusting, and the blood, and the sweat, and the blood.

Poor America, I have such sweet regard for you.
        Sometimes I feel like your fair-weather
friend and it's always raining. But why
        do you let men into your pines & wells?
Your rock gardens & slow creeks, your soft meat, your idiot skate parks.

Suppose you had no Splenda packets,
        no new phones, only the reddish fields of Nebraska,
the forgotten dusks of New Hampshire, clouds
        your only aftermath, your only reprieve.
Forgiveness follows the unforgivable.

Now guerillas take to Appalachia,
        let us grow rutabagas in perpetuity,
let us plant poppies in toto, summer squash in excelsis.
        Let's gather round the banjo. And we'll name
towns after the men we've killed. And lay our hammers down,
        steel to steel, sex to sex, dream a little dream.

But

KENNETH POBO

I don't believe in gay marriage and
gays don't have relationships
as good as my own I'm not
anti-gay but who wants them

living in our neighborhood
they might give the wrong impression
I'm not anti-gay but I won't have
my kids taught by one imagine

some dyke helping my daughter
to the girls room I'm not anti-gay
but Pastor Bimp says Jesus hates them
they're all going to hell

anyway I'm not anti-gay but they
shouldn't have any benefits through
their so-called partners why should
my taxes support sodomy I'm not

anti-gay but my friends are straight
we grew up knowing right
from wrong I'm not anti-gay
but concentration camps might give

gays a place to enjoy their own kind
I'm not anti-gay but this is a free
country I'm entitled to my own opinion
they creep me out I can't help it but

To A Landscaper

PAUL HOSTOVSKY

You smell like a lawnmower, love.
Come sit your grassy ass down
on the bed. I want to taste the green
sweat spreading like wealth all over
your body, the lawns of the rich and
gasoline commingling on your skin and
bones. I want to feel the suburbs
rub off on us like the laughing poor
streaking through the formal gardens
of the scowling rich, the fine gold pollen
sticking to our nakedness like sex on sex,
our own bed filthy and rich beneath
the well-oiled machine of our lovemaking.

Wanting to Hold Your Hand

MARTIN STEINGESSER

How quiet the room, no one else—
not the other son, sulking among gardens
in orange Florida, not the loving granddaughter.
In the next bed, no one. Just us
and a stillness of photographs: sisters
with husbands and children; my brother
and I as kids; and you, young wife and mother,
lined atop a bureau the length of the room: linen roses
in a blue vase, a plastic pitcher, glass of water.
The ceiling light, was it too bright?
Thank god someone put your false teeth
back right. In the hallway, a hush of shadows
kept passing; beyond the window, rows of cars
under streetlights, the intravenous dripping.

Once, seeing you off at the airport, I watched
you climb stairs from the tarmac to the plane.
Eighty-something, you took each step
with one foot, the other lagging, and a vision
flashed on me—you, posing with your twin;
now a flapper kissing someone on a city street;
now the Samaritan busing bread across town
for sick friends; my troublesome mother—a line
of you boarding that flight, the way this moment
you were carrying us all into your death.

At the window, I stared into the night
wondering about sparrows I'd watched earlier
taking dust baths, flitting about.
Where do they sleep? Do they tuck heads
under a wing? I think of the spirit
like a small bird, a sparrow nesting
behind the eyes. I would look long
and deep in yours—the way a child might
earnestly lift a lid and ask, "Are you there?"
for a glimpse…That moment—
a breath, and when I turned back
you'd flown.

Contributors

Jeffrey C. Alfier lives in Tucson, Arizona. His publication credits include *Birmingham Poetry Review, Crab Orchard Review, Santa Clara Review,* and forthcoming in *Pearl Magazine*. He is author of a chapbook, *Strangers Within the Gate* (2005), and is the editor of San Pedro River Review.

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Cindy Childress is an American expat in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia where she teaches English literacy to Manmar refugee children. She has a Ph.D. in English with creative writing emphasis from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and her poetry was recently published in the *The Louisiana Review, The Dead Mule, Conversation Quarterly,* and the Spinster's Press anthology, *Women. Period.*, among others. She also contributed a short play to theatrical production, *The Patriot Acts II,* which was staged last fall.

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Monica A. Hand is a mother, grandmother, writer, book artist and poet currently residing in Harlem, NY. Her poetry can be found in E. Ethelbert Miller's *Beyond the Frontier, Cave Canem's Gathering Ground, Obsidian III, Scarab,* and *The Mom Egg*. She is a recipient of Maryland State and Montgomery County Individual Artist awards

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Randall Horton is the author of *The Definition of Place*, and the upcoming poetry collection *The Lingua Franca of Ninth Street*, both from Main Street Rag. Randall is the co-editor of *Fingernails Across the Chalkboard: Poetry and Prose on HIV/AIDs from the Black Diaspora* (Third World Press, 2007). Randall also has a MFA from Chicago State University and a PhD from SUNY Albany.

Paul Hostovsky has been featured on *Poetry Daily, Verse Daily, and The Writer's Almanac.* His poems have won a Pushcart Prize, the Muriel Craft Bailey Award from *The Comstock Review*, and chapbook contests from Grayson Books, Riverstone Press, and The Frank Cat Press. His first full-length collection, *Bending the Notes*, is available from Main Street Rag. To read more of his poetry, visit his website: www.paulhostovsky.com

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William Joel is an educator, storyteller and writer located in the Mid-Hudson region of New York. His works have appeared in such publications as *Concrete Wolf* and *Chronogram*, and for children in *Stories for Children, Wee Ones* and *Appleseeds.*

Donna R. Kevic lives in West Virginia.

J.B. Mulligan has had poems and stories in dozens of magazines, including recently, *Contemporary Sonnet, Argestes, Tonopah Review, Loch Raven Review, Short Story* and *The Externalist*, and two chapbooks: *The Stations of the Cross* and *THIS WAY TO THE EGRESS*, and has appeared in the anthology *Inside Out: A Gathering of Poets* (http://www.geocities.com/anneyohn2003/index.htm).

Jason Myers grew up in Maryland, holds a BA from Bennington College, and MFA from NYU, and currently lives in Atlanta, where he will be a student in the Master of Divinity program at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in the fall. His work has appeared in *AGNI, The Paris Review, West Branch* and other journals.

Kenneth Pobo had a new book of poems in 2008 from WordTech Press called *Glass Garden.* He teaches Creative Writing and English at Widener University in Pennsylvania.

Martin Steingesser is Portland, Maine's first Poet Laureate. "A musician and acrobat, his book, *Brothers of Morning*, ablaze with imagination," wrote poet Laure-Anne Bosselaar. "A burning, tender voice," said former Maine Poet Laureate Baron Wormser. His poems have appeared in many different publications, including the national magazines *The Sun* and *The Progressive*, and in literary publications such as *The American Poetry Review, Hanging Loose, Rattle, The Ohio Review, Nimrod International Journal, Inkwell Journal* and *The Beloit Poetry Journal*. His poems have garnered a number of awards, most recently First Place in Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance 2008 Maine Literary Awards. They are represented in several anthologies, such as *The Maine Poets*, edited by Wesley McNair (Down East Books: 2003); *Motion: American Sports Poems* (University of Iowa Press, 2001); *Poetry Comes Up Where It Can: Poems from The Amicus Journal*, 1900-2000 (University of Utah Press, 2000); *Speaking of New England* (North Country Press: Belfast, ME, 1993); *Blood to Remember: American Poets on the Holocaust* (Time Being Books, St. Louis, MO, 2007); and *Naming the World* (Heinemann Publishers: Portsmouth, NH, 2006).

Gina M. Tabasso holds a master's degree in English and has been published in many literary journals and anthologies. She has three chapbooks in print: *From Between My Legs, Disrobing* and *Front Lines*. Gina earns her living as the corporate communications manager for a tire distributor and enjoys riding her horse, practicing yoga, belly dancing, teaching poetry workshops, giving poetry readings and spending time with those she loves.

Amy Yee is an American journalist based in India. She worked for the Financial Times of London for nine years in New Delhi and New York. She currently lives in Dharamsala, the exile home of the Dalai Lama, where she is researching a book about Tibetan exiles in India. Her journalism has been published in the *Financial Times*, the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Boston Globe Magazine* and the *New York Times* on the Web. She is a graduate of Wellesley College and earned an MFA from Hunter College.

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