

Len Lawson

Harriet Jacobs and Maya Angelou Sit Together in the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame

& for the duration of their stays their mouths will be closed. Yes, they can embrace. Yes, tears can be shed and kissed on each other's cheeks then wiped away to soften the dry wooden floor of the Boyd Study at Weymouth. Naturally, their arms may be folded and their legs crossed. Their necks crane around the 19th Century room, and their backs

marry the regal velvet recliners. They even slip off their best heels to arouse their soles on the vast carpet with the rippling waves of an Atlantic that brought their ancestors to bear on these Carolina shores. Yes, they could volley their best quotes back and forth like Althea Gibson across the mahogany coffee table

between them. They could exchange banter with calculated breaths from lungs that have breathed in both the sweet air of love and the toxic plumes of hate—dust off their ageless memories for stories that could fill the entire plantation house. Yet each lady understands the priceless value of silence. Harriet, confined beneath the

creaky floor boards of her grandmother's home, took almost a vow of silence to eventually shout the praises of freedom. As a child, Maya took the relay of that same vow when her abuser was murdered thinking she caused the man's death. This silence settles in the room like a fog, but it screams *victory* and never again *defeat*. Their works are behind them

now. Their coffee and tea can swim in their cups at their blackest and rejoice. They can each sip with care or gulp lavishly and try not to choke on their wheezing laughter. They can shuffle to the window and see no crops to plant or harvest. Their words have made them free. Their lines of verse and prose have sustained their very souls. Their endless

words now called documents have been preserved for all time—enough words to usher generations to their knees before them offering congratulatory gratitude for their impossible journeys. Each has filled the earth with words to brand the soul. But in this little room with their peers on the walls and more like them soon to come, neither woman ever needs to utter another mumbling word.

Grandma's Rage

5'4" black/blue flame
smelted from magma
Her bones feared it

Ethel rose at dawn
effervesced all day
cooled in spurts

Her eruption was the tea kettle
burned her fingers on it
her Florida Evans moment

probably meant it for my daddy
or any of her other seven children
when they felt they were smarter

or for the one she lost
to the car accident at 19
lost my daddy too at 38

She baptized
the rest of her days
in the lava