

# AUNT CHLOE

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Nikky Finney

Photo credit: Wofford College

“Well-Loved Black Girl...at the Scene of the Crime”

AUNT CHLOE: This feels like an especially difficult time—death, loss, dislocation, alienation, isolation—we are surviving through so much. In my own scholarship and poems, I think about how we move alongside and through grief endured by national-scale traumas like police and school shootings and, lately, I am meditating on the role of the poet in documenting the fall of Empire—telling our lived experience of it. How are you thinking about the function of poetry and the role of the poet, within and beyond national borders, during this historical moment? Has this changed with time?

FINNEY: This does feel like an especially difficult time. I feel it in every bone, every capillary, every cell. I also feel this truth in both brains. The brain at the top of my head concerned with ideas and information and the one that resides in my belly that analogues and digitizes my fury and joy and imagination. We often talk about the poet as the witness speaking and writing into what she has seen and lived. I feel that “witness” remains a critical position for the poet. I also feel that the poet can’t just document these difficult times. We need her legs and arms to be attentive, to attend and engage in and stand up for, or with. She must occupy arenas that define what it means to be alive and furiously busy and thereby refuse to be merely collateral damage—as “the Empire falls.” I also believe the witness position must not be simplified or relegated to a chair, desk, or university. We are people who have always been on the move. We do not have to only sit in order to inscribe our witnessing on pieces of paper. We must be in the wind and with the wind. Billionaires are rocketing into space and only inviting the well-to-do. Millionaires are buying up castles with color-coordinated matching bunkers. The status quo is back selling the old reliable lie that they never forced African people into slave ships and furthermore American life began with fife and drum and not our four hundred years of back-breaking labor, rape, and murder. Thieves are at the door and on the roof. Toni Morrison (rest in peace and power) graced us with

the warning in her *p*Riceless Nobel Laureate Address: “Official language smitheryed to sanction ignorance and preserve privilege is a suit of armor polished to a shocking glitter, a husk from which the knight departed long ago.” Poets have always led the charge towards truth and resilience and freedom. We must do as our grandmothers and grandfathers taught and then we must do more and each of us must define what the more is.

AUNT CHLOE: I am always drawn to the ways that one encounters the natural world in your poems, and I know that you are a woman who ritualistically ensconces herself in nature—you have talked elsewhere about carving space for long walks each day and the importance of quietude in your life. In his gorgeous book, *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, scholar Kevin Quashie describes the sacredness of a Black woman's interior that is luscious, unruly and, above all, sovereign. During your recent visit to Spelman College in the spring of 2021 you insisted that students begin to "build an interior that knows how to sustain and fight back." Do you have words of wisdom regarding the development and protection of one's exquisite interior in the midst of a threatened and threatening outer world?

FINNEY: Bless the two profound hearts of Kevin Quashie for returning the word “sovereignty” to me. In order to build this most critical barrier to the world and garden for herself, the Black woman understands that she requires no one's permission to do either or both. Second, she understands she will have to build her interior garden with time which she does not officially have, but nevertheless must seize, with finger, hand, or toe. Before I knew who I was, I knew whose legs I had fallen from. These undefeatable women who walked and worked and refused foolishness and buzzed all around me like a colony of the righteous who knew well the sweetness of freedom. I paid such close attention. They were dramatic and stunning. They were beautiful and furiously determined. They knew how to make it upriver without a boat, without a raft, without a paddle.

How many times as a girl did I watch these women slide a straight-back chair near an open window in order to make peace with the news that someone with her same eyes was being shipped off to another war? How many times did I watch one of them walk out back under the pear tree that her mother planted and lean into it just like it had arms because someone had been laid off—again? How many times did I watch one of them pluck tomato seeds out of an envelope stored in the freezer and drop them into flowerpots waiting on the sunny side of the porch. I have in my Black girl genius bank vault film reel after film reel of the unpublished lives of Black women teaching me how to seed my interior against the violence of a white supremacist world in order to grow the inner rainforest required to make it to Black woman old age.

AUNT CHLOE: I want to turn to your recent book *Love Child's Hotbed of Occasional Poetry*, which contains beautiful poems in conversation with an abundance of ephemeral artifacts: photographs, letters, flyers, epigraphs, notes. One of many pairings that stands out to me is the newspaper clipping of your mother standing beside the two hundred year-old family tree and the hotbed poems on either side. Another is a promotional for your first book *On Wings Made of Gauze* at the local Sumter, South Carolina Kroger grocer, alongside an occasional poem documenting President Trump's ascendancy. Are these artifacts entirely from your personal archive, and in what ways are they speaking to and against poems within the book?

FINNEY: The artifacts that you mentioned, as well as the others found in the book, are entirely plucked from the forest of manilla folders, old hat boxes, bureau drawers, and file cabinets that I have kept all my life. These are my personal treasure chests. I remember thinking about a new book and searching through them looking for conjoined metaphors or moments in my life that might tell the story of what it meant to be a well-loved Black girl raised at the scene of the crime. From the age of eleven or twelve, I kept

journal books that documented the love and the crimes themselves. I have done this act of self-keeping for over fifty years. Not for the world but for me. I have made a mighty habit of keeping up with personal things that later became essential personal building blocks. Colorful. Beautiful. Sensory-filled. Minutiae, ephemera, paper memories. Photographs, receipts, a stub to The Jackson Five concert when I was sixteen and then the Earth, Wind, and Fire concert when I was twenty-one. Black music and Black expression were always essential through lines. Let's say that one human life is made of ten million pieces from a puzzle. In *Love Child's Hotbed of Occasional Poetry*, I hoped to zero in on a small open field of those puzzle pieces and make something valuable. I was a girl who learned quickly that the world cared nothing about saving the evidence of who and what had made me. My realization of this disregard for the lives of Black people and Black women especially was there from the start. I decided to save these tiny "tintype" maps of my journey just in case. In case I ever had children of my own and needed to show them what I had learned about self-preservation. In case I was ever given the chance to pass on the power of my personal story to other Black and brown girls who had come to the world hungry, and curious, about their *raison d'être* on planet Earth.

AUNT CHLOE: What does it mean to name oneself an "Occasional Poet"? When I hear this term, a long legacy of Black writers like Phillis Wheatley, Langston Hughes, and Lucille Clifton come to mind—poets who bore witness to pivotal historical events and provided readers with an important vocabulary that we continue to return to. What are your goals as an occasional poet and do you see yourself within a tradition, as extending a tradition? How does one capture the emotional tenor of a remembered occasion?

FINNEY: The goal of writing for me is simple. I have this great desire to get it right—with words. I want the moment I am writing into to take on a new dimension. I want my verbs and metaphors to enter and levitate the initial idea. I want the work to be true to the occasion but I also want to create a new atmosphere within or around it. New weather. I am not a reporter. I read for the facts and then I lean in with my imagination. I am tunneling into the darkness unsure of what I will find. I am mining for bloodlines and through lines and magical realism lines. Before I finish I am trying my best to land on a sturdy capstone of the heart. I am excited when a word like "occasional" descends into my imagination and I can twirl it a little and see it in the round. In this way, I am occasionally the poet—other times I am occasionally the woman with her hands deep in the hotbed dirt of her backyard, or occasionally the woman trying hard not to adopt another cat that has wandered onto her porch, or occasionally the only daughter taking care of her eighty-seven-year-old mother, singing "Misty" in the kitchen as she never fails to remind me of how much cotton she picked as a girl. Occasionally, I am asked to write occasional poems. I absolutely agree that I am in the tradition of those astounding writers that you named. But I do not feel that I am in their tradition because I am astounding. I feel that, like them, I have remembered (or been proudly reminded) to carve out a door, as I do my work, that allows my ancestors, my community, to walk through with me.

AUNT CHLOE: "Black Boy with Cow: A Still Life" is a long and masterful eighteen-page elegy in remembrance of George Stinney Jr., the youngest person to die by electric chair at just fourteen years-old. The poem also pays homage to your late father, the honorable Ernest A. Finney Jr. who served as Chief Justice of the South Carolina Supreme Court and whose commitment to equal protection under the law was formidable. May you talk to us about composing this poem—about Stinney, your father, and commemoration through poetry?

FINNEY: I am two-headed. I try my best to live in the present moment while continuing my autodidactic search through the endless pages of brutal American history. The stories of white privilege and how it dangled and hung and used the Black body as a super host—in whatever way it so desired. I have written my poems and books by way of these dual binoculars since I was fourteen or fifteen years old. I grew up

with the backdrop of the Vietnam War and the never-ending war against blackness and the war against gay people and the war against women and the war against anything that did not put a hand over its heart and pledge allegiance to an American ideal that no one really seemed to be working toward.

I moved back home to South Carolina in 2013, to help my mother care for my father, who had recently been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. I thought when I packed up and left Kentucky that I was working on a book about the magical out-of-doors and its profound impact upon this Black girl's sensibilities. Nikky Finney finally takes on Peonies (my favorite flower), the magical regenerative life of the octopus, the sprightly conversations of whales (I have two LP albums with only whale sounds!!!), how black swans dotted my childhood like butterflies. But I learned early on to pay attention to the moment I was in more than the moment I was planning to be in. So the old book idea grew wings, deeply fertilized by the new world I had stepped into that also contained the last menthol breaths of my father.

I came home one night from helping my mother and I realized that my father was dying right before my eyes. I had been studying what happens to the body of Alzheimer's patients. He was still sitting in his wheelchair but had not spoken to us in several days. His neurons weren't firing like they used to. His cerebral cortex was shriveling. Parts of his brain were shutting down. I remember whispering, "He's saying goodbye but not waving." I remember reaching for one particular box of ephemera. The box that contained every letter he had ever written to me since I left home at the age of eighteen. There were dozens of different addresses on the fronts of the 400-500 envelopes. No matter where I had lived his handwriting had found me. I sat on the floor with my great pile of Daddy words. I smiled at his perfect and beautiful handwriting, laughed at his humor. In one letter he called me, "the world's greatest con artist." I found myself marveling at this epistolary vault, the many ways he had taught me to be tougher than hatred, and the many ways he had loved me throughout my life, so unconditionally, so loudly. In that moment I wondered if these letters were part of the literary architecture of the new book that I thought would singularly be focused on the out-of-doors?

Shortly after moving home, news of the George J. Stinney, Jr. retrial hit the South Carolina newspapers. I knew I would attend. I knew I would scribble into whatever I found there in my courtroom seat. I began immediately to research the case before the second trial began. My father's life and George J. Stinney's life began a new cosmology on the page. I noticed when Stinney was born and when my father was born. I was stunned at the alignment of their ages and how I had been a girl growing up near where the Stinney family had tried their best to work, keep their heads down, and avoid the brutality of 1943 South Carolina. I began to understand how some Black boys made it out of 1943 to 1944 and some had not. That is when the trajectory of the poem entered its own air space. When the couplets began to speculate about the difference between a Black boy with a cow versus a Black boy with Pontiac. The foundation of the eighteen pages you spoke of entered its own air space. I could see a black tornado in the distance. I could feel a hailstorm of questions pouring forth. I knew I could make something that mattered.

AUNT CHLOE: How would you like *Love Child's Hotbed of Occasional Poetry* to be encountered, to be read? Are there any particular wishes you have for the book?

FINNEY: I'm well-aware that I live in the age of Twitter and other social media formats that dictate how you say what you say. In 2021 they want to say it fast and quick. But that's not what I do. That's not why poetry entralls me. Social media doesn't dictate what my words belie. *Love Child's Hotbed of Occasional Poetry* is a book made primarily of Blackstrap Molasses. Slow. Steady. A burnished sweetness. A healing if you can make the time. Come to it when you have some time and if you don't, leave it be.

Check out poetry by Nikky Finney in this issue here.

(This interview was conducted via email by Sequoia Maner. Nikky Finney photo on Aunt Chloe homepage by Forrest Clonts.)

Nikky Finney was born by the sea in South Carolina and raised during the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Arts Movements. She has been a faculty member at Cave Canem summer workshop for African American poets; a founding member of the Affrilachian Poets, a particular place for poets of color in Appalachia; poet and professor for twenty-three years at the University of Kentucky; and visiting professor at Berea and Smith Colleges. She won the PEN American Open Book Award in 1996 and the Elizabeth O'Neill Verner Award for the Arts in South Carolina in 2016. She edited *Black Poets Lean South*, a Cave Canem anthology (2007), and authored *On Wings Made of Gauze* (1985), *Rice* (1995), *Heartwood* (1997), *The World Is Round* (2003), and *Head Off & Split*, winner of the 2011 National Book Award for Poetry. Her acceptance speech has become a thing of legend, described by the 2011 NBA host, John Lithgow, as "the best acceptance speech ever—for anything." Her most recent collection of poems, *Love Child's Occasional Hotbed of Poetry* (2020) was a finalist for *The L.A. Times* Book Award.

In her home state she involves herself in the day-to-day battles for truth and justice while also guiding both undergraduates and M.F.A. students at the University of South Carolina, where she is the John H. Bennett, Jr., Chair in Creative Writing and Southern Letters, with appointments in both the Department of English Language and Literature and the African American Studies Program (which she proudly notes is forty-six years strong). Finney is the recipient of the Aiken Taylor Award for Modern American Poetry from the University of the South and the Wallace Stevens Award from the Academy of American Poets. Nikky Finney's work, in book form and video, including her now legendary acceptance speech, is on display in the inaugural exhibition of the African American Museum of History and Culture in Washington, D.C.

For more about Nikky Finney: <https://nikkyfinney.net/>)