

The Moth and the Whipoorwill

I used to be like the Cecropia
flying blind towards the gleam
fluorescent lures signal firing
my optimistic outlook.
I disdained the Afro-pessimist
reading group started by allies.
A mother could not afford that toll.
Now, I over tip Chiron to reverse
traverse Lethe. My new kinfolk
recommend the catharsis of dark waters.
The ones who stand on opposite
gravesides at funerals, flanking
both widow and doppelganger. One
boldly unveils her grief while the other
hides the saline tracks spreading
like fungi under her foundation.
Audubon's plate 82 maps every stage
of life but transcendence is beyond
the inevitable snap of the whip.

A Crisis in Negro Letters

For Jessie Redmon Fauset

In those days, your only recourse
was to write a letter, to find some
quiet place, unscrew your inkwell
and get to the business of calling
out your feelings without showing
your color. At first, Dearest Nina,
then Dear Madame, then the paper
crumpled and instead an invitation
extended for tea. That's the proper
way to do it. Them two in heels
and hose, silk taffeta and wool
gabardine, the maid returning with
more hot water, while they exchange
compliments on the orientalist
décor of the parlor, the plump
perspicacity of the seat cushions.
The editor, *former*-editor, called
for cordials, and Mrs. almost turns
over the Savage, a lithe, young bronze
holding a scythe aloft. Try the *millefeuille*,
the opera cake, the *kouign-amann*. The
editor, *former*-editor, knew that behind
her back they called her Paris, Texas, and
Frank-oh-file, but even Mrs. stumbles
on correct pronunciation of his name.

This all started with a letter he wrote
her first year in Ithaca, filled with loops,
and curves tracing his statistical dreams
of Black domination. The nutgraf:
come be my righthand woman.
He knew she had an ear for lyric genius.
She did each issue proud. Volumes measured
by arthritic digits and thickening glasses.
Midwived a Renaissance. So much Death in 1926.
She tried to keep it light. Once dismissed,
she gets his wife drunk on limoncello, dishabilles
her marcelled curls, kisses her raspberry lips,
and sends her back ravished but none the wiser.
She doesn't chastise. She keeps his secrets close,
buries her shattered heart in the press.

Twisting My Son's Hair

My girlfriends with girls suck their teeth and flutter their false lashes
when I complain of aching fingers or back spasms. They begrudge

every broke pick and lost bobby pin as they recount how hours escalate
into years they have spent keeping their daughters' hair in check

while I lingered over my own toilette, overslept, and never learned
to adjust my tension. I complain mostly out of pride in whom I have borne.

I'm jealous of the hands that will part his mane and the thighs he will crouch
between. When I meet his first love, I will note she just reaches his shoulder,

that our profiles match our skin tones. Say I will adore her whatever her temperament or
who her people and mourn his first heartbreak as I admire my handiwork from a distance.

My Gifted Southern Ancestress

She wore her hair in two long braids
and was afraid of the dark
School was over early.
The way home a minefield.

Stars sparked bright-bright,
at dusk, blinking until dawn.
Cotton thickets, melon skins,
& bayou banjos courted snakebite.

She had to learn what was quick
and where was dry. Long braids,
sable eyes, and nimble fingers
no good for sitting still in the dark.

At fourteen, she left for the nearest town:
a new moon paddle past gator balls,
boo-hag gatherings, and sweeping moss.
She found shelter with an auntie whose
shotgun house had its own number.

Marriage to a pullman porter sent her
west, where she learned to wear white
gloves & a sable befitting a deaconess
who sat in the second row of Second Baptist.

All I knew for sure: she left me starlight
earrings set in white gold. Each time
I wear them, the nickel burns my ears.

If Hope Was a Watercolor, Sorrow Would Be the Brush

This series responds to a selection of Kara Walker's paintings exhibited in Black Ecologies in Contemporary American Art at Pomona's Benton Museum. In their previous incarnation as chat labels, they invited viewers to participate in an ongoing dialogue.

1. Breadfruit

The breadfruit isn't as delectable as a guava. During its transport from Polynesia to the Caribbean, the potted plants drained the water rations of the *HMS Bounty*—the ship teeters at the top of the waterfall, on the verge of a mutiny or shipwreck as the green, oxymoronic globe drops from its indigenous origins to new soil. The women's silhouettes tend to the trees.

2. Guava

A young woman's fingers touch a guava moon that resembles a miniature watermelon. Guava is the magic ingredient in the *refugiado*—the signature pastry of Porto, a fifty-year-old bakery started by Cuban immigrants. After viewing this image, procure this concoction of jam and cream cheese from the West Covina location. Pink flesh seeds what should be kept private from the prying priors of the auction block. A slaver-in-training's yellow hair recalls Wordsworth's daffodils. During Jamaica Kincaid's childhood in Antigua, children were examined through recitations of British poetry completely incongruent in a tropic clime.

3. Sugarcane

Aunt Jemima drops her machete and bites the stalk with her teeth. Perhaps she intends to chew her own pulp to boil syrup for American pancakes, or maybe I'm mistaking the cane for a snake, its sugar for venom.

4. Cotton

Oversize cotton balls are drawn to a scale that indexes trauma. Enslaved Atlases with knees buckled and locked to make their quota bear the inflation. Walker has smuggled one of her signature shadow profiles into this watercolor. She magnifies the men, obscuring the women picking rows in the background, dragging their sagging sacks. One overseer overlooks. Another reclines against the calyx smoking tobacco. They ride cotton's coattails.

5. Water

A couple enjoys a moment of repose between small green islands whose peaks suggest what lies beneath. No fish are biting but the line beguiles a pod of dolphins. Is that a waterspout on the horizon? The listing boat suggests rough seas ahead. Unbothered, the woman replenishes while the man daydreams. After independence, three dolphins on a white shield will give chase on the Anguillan flag; they share the sea with the union jack.

Runework

The vender holds out the bag
and I draw forth fertility.
At my age, this is funny.
That door is a woodstove,
filled with ash, needing
to be tidied and disposed
of. If I had received this
as a girl, where would I run
now that there are states
where women need an
underground network
to live an ungoverned
life. I'm sure it would
make some desperate to
to see the bisected square.
To which craft am I beholden:
Ifa, tarot, bones, palms, tea leaves,
the stars—que sera sera—the exact
insight that matches my blood quantum.
Whatever percentages I am trans
Atlantic from two continents
meeting in the Land I call home.
Scripture says we are *all of one
blood*. So does Lucy, her
unearthed remains witness
what we were, what we shall be.