

Stories: A Story

Marena Kleinpeter

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2026

Committee:

Jeffrey Fracé

Cathy Madden

Scott Hafso

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

School of Drama

©Copyright 2026

Marena Kleinpeter

University of Washington

Abstract

Stories: A Story

Marena Kleinpeter

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Jeffrey Fracé

School of Drama

When the history of your people comes from faded and partial records, how do you fill in the gaps? When so much of modern media depicts the lives of your ancestors only in terms of their trauma and not of their triumphs, how do you come to terms with that history? Do you imagine the full lives of the people who are just names, or numbers, or merely qualifiers on ownership rosters and inventories? And do you color in the lines by soaking in the stories of people who might have had the same questions as you? When what can be called historical fiction might be the best idea you have of where you come from, you take what you know and turn it into something that you hope those who came before you could only imagine in their wildest dreams. *Stories: A Story* is just that. More than just stories of trauma passed through generations, but the purity and simplicity of human love, hope, and joy found in the connective links of family passing all that they had, their stories, down from one era to the next, uniting each generation to those before and after. Following five fictionalized characters based on real, sparsely recorded people, we get a glimpse of what their lives may have consisted of outside the hardships they endured, and that instilled in them a love for what truly matters; connection to who they are, where they come from, where they are going, and the ones who will get them there.

Marena Kleinpeter

Graduate Thesis – *Stories: A Story*

March 19, 2026

This story has many beginnings. Many of those came from my time in the Professional Actor Training program at the University of Washington, and a great deal of seeds were also planted long before I was even considering grad school. There were ultimately two personal stories and two books that were of the greatest impact. In the summer of 2018, about a year and a half after losing both of my maternal grandparents in my senior year of college, I flew from Seattle to be with my family in Janesville, Iowa, for their memorial service. Among the many stories told of my white mother's family that weekend, one told by a "grand cousin" stood out because it took our family back all the way to the ship, Lusitania, which brought my ancestors over from England. I wanted that kind of information for the Black side of my family too. An "I don't know" from my father *bothered* me deeply, and a couple of years of research later, in the summer of 2020 I found my great-great-grandmother Harriett and someone who might have been her mother on a faded Louisiana record. This was before a distant cousin and genealogist told me that we are descendants of a man named Cato, who came from Africa.

In the summer of 2024, I read *Roots* by Alex Haley. More specifically, I listened to the audiobook. It somehow felt appropriate to listen to a story of a family whose own story was passed down through oral tradition. As that book did for so many others when it was originally published in 1976, it engendered in me a desire to know the story of my own relatives and how they might have lived. That led to my reading several books whose characters were African or of African descent. In late winter of 2025, I read *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi, which, like many of the others, spanned generations. I soaked them all in, imagining that these fictional characters who felt so human would have been the contemporaries of my own family members. This profoundly shifted something in the world of my identity.

In the time between finding some of the records of my family and the reading of these two books, I decided to continue my training as an actor at the University of Washington School of Drama, and many of the classes I took and the professors I learned from (though I'll detail only a few of them) shaped what this show became.

My first opportunity to put an explicitly Black story in front of an audience at UW came in Bridget Connor's class in our first year. We were told to select a story from world mythology. I realized

that the default for “myth” didn’t have to be Greek, and so I decided to look into African mythology. I decided that I wanted to share a story that would contribute to this ongoing search for my own roots and identity. I ended up with a piece that was simple in its design – I wore a black shirt and an African print skirt, with a golden armband serving as my only prop – and specific in both physical and vocal gestures to tell the story of the death of a beloved queen. The outline of this project required that we incorporate a number of things, including speaking, singing, and wailing. All of this to be done with techniques we had learned in Bridget’s voice class, as well as Scott Hafso’s speech and singing classes.

Also in our first year, I was reintroduced to Suzuki. I had gotten a taste for it in undergrad but never got a full scope of the technique and its usefulness in performance. At first, I thought it was just strict and rigorous movement for an extended period of time, but one day before class in Meany studio I decided to adjust my attitude about it. It became about a form that I could do “right.” So often there is not a “right” in performance, but when given a form in Suzuki, I knew exactly what I was aiming for, and each practice became another chance to get better. This attitude adjustment opened up so much! It was no longer just about doing something with precision. It became the means whereby I could practice the thing that I so often get notes about: slowing down. I was instructed time and again that on the outside I may be going at a 4, but on the inside moving at a 10, or that I am always on both the gas and the brakes.

Beyond these classes, along with a solo show class taught by Valerie Curtis-Newton in our second year (where I wrote a fun little show about different flavors of ice cream – personified and throwing frozen peas and making new friends – and learned that it really is okay to have a show that looks nothing like anyone else’s) this story drew inspiration from many places. Perhaps it is best to walk through the script itself to detail this. It is a collection of lives lived, so the invitation, as Cathy Madden might say, is to walk with me and gather these collected stories.

LIGHTS up

(sitting cross-legged at center on a block, hands cupped over heart, eyes closed and smiling. Eyes open and hands come down. Look at the palms of the hands as they raise. An offering. Watch something cupped in the hands take off.)

(Nigerian dialect) A story, a story. Akukọ (hands to chest)

This opening moment of *Stories: A Story* came from something that I did that I was almost satisfied with in our time in the class that came to be known as Embodied History of Acting. We took the slow specificity and intentionality of Noh drama and were told to do one simple, lasting gesture. I sat cross legged at center stage, hands clasped together. Ever so slowly, I opened my hands and raised them to the sky. Slow was hard for me! But I loved the simplicity and specificity of it and appreciated that the assignment forced me to slow down, enjoy, and learn from each moment of the sustained gesture. I clearly remember Jeffrey Fracé saying when I finally concluded that he was waiting for me to see whatever had been in my hands take flight. I loved that idea because of the clarity of storytelling with the simple gesture of flicking my gaze upward. I knew early on in the process of creating my solo show that I wanted the chance to redo that, and thinking of it as something that takes flight (and which will later return) at the start of the show seemed fitting. I hoped that it set the tone for the piece by introducing simplicity and gesture right from the moment the lights came up. Additionally, the word *akụkọ* means "story" in Igbo, which is the language my West African ancestors likely spoke. And of course, the idea to pass down a word in the native language comes directly from *Roots*.

Eloise: *(My voice)* My name is Eloise, and this is my story. It might be yours too.

(Full Gesture series, in left rotation: King -turn- Sunset/Sunrise -turn- Reach-turn- Fireside -turn back to front- Crown. Hands to chest)

The idea to use gestures came from Valerie Curtis-Newton telling us in our solo show class that not everything had to be spoken. When I set out to write this show, I wanted to see if I could use as little text as possible. I remember listening to an episode of a podcast about a TV show that I love, and one of the actor hosts (Sterling K. Brown) talked about storytelling through the repetition of gestures. I wanted to explore that. I had to ask myself what gestures could tell the story of storytelling.

It begins in West Africa...five generations ago. *(Whisper gesture)* With my great-great-great-grandfather, Cato, who was born to a family of royal story tellers.

This is part of the personal truth of this show. I do have an ancestor, Cato Brass, who was born in Africa. In fact, each of the character names are names from the paternal side of my own family tree. I also learned, in research that I was doing for Bridget's class, that the role of a Griot – an oral historian and storyteller – in West Africa was often inherited through family. That seemed the perfect framing device for what I wanted. Now, was it clear to the audience that Cato was meant to be a Griot? It wasn't explicitly stated, but the DNA was there.

(seated on block, legs spread, hands on hips. Smiling looking from one side of the audience all the way around to the other.) **LIGHTS shift, SOUND: You are Called to Join the King's Guard**

This song, along with the other instrumental selections used a little later, is from the soundtrack of the movie *Woman King*. The movie is based on true accounts of women warriors in the West African kingdom of Dahomey. I knew, simply, that I wanted to use something from this movie so richly saturated in African heritage to represent the part of my story that was directly African. I chose the song by playing the soundtrack while I rehearsed until I heard something that I liked. This moment, when time shifts, the lights change, and the sound comes in, is probably the moment I am most proud of aesthetically.

Cato: *(Nigerian)* In the year of the Great Rain, *(standing on block)* the floods came and washed over the land. And when the water dried up, the village of Umunachi found itself prey to a great beast. But one day, a brave soldier, a son of the village, set out to slay the beast. He returned triumphant, and to honor him, the leaders of Umunachi offered the hand of their daughter to him in marriage. The two were wed, and went on to establish a village of their own, where they ruled in harmony. *(Gesture of a King.)* Their daughter was my mother. That village, this village. This is my story, which I have related. If it be sweet sweet, or if it be not sweet, let some come back to me, and take some elsewhere. *(Stand to bow with both hands over stomach, head only slightly inclined.)*

A few things of note here. The story itself is entirely fabricated, though based in African mythology. I came across the name of the village while reading Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Dream Count*. The quote introduced here and repeated at the end of the show about the sweet sweet story is a line adapted from Gail E. Haley's children's book, *A Story, A Story* (which is also part of the inspiration for the title of the show).

Lastly, dialects were an important element for this show. I had a wonderful mentor in undergrad who began my training as a dialect coach, which led to my researching and teaching a Nigerian dialect for a production of *A Raisin in the Sun*. That work served as the basis for this, and I expanded on it for Bridget's class when I had the idea to explore the sounds of the migration of my family history. Having more of an understanding now of vibrations and resonance, I found Beth McGuire's *African Accents* particularly helpful. Her physical and vocal explanation of the Nigerian dialect helped differentiate Cato from the other characters I would play.

(Sit on opposite side of block, rest. SOUND: Oyo to the Village - abrupt wake up and kidnapping. Bondage. A ship. A crossing. A survey and hand held. As the music ends, an exhale.)

Here is where the Suzuki training came in. Timed to the music, I built in a slow cross. Similar to the journey that happens at the end of Basic One or in a slow ten, this is where Cato's life in Africa transitions to his life in America. All of this told in gesture and breath, with text spoken once the sustained movement comes to an end.

Cato: *(Nigerian)* Stewart, my son, I will tell you that where I was born the sun would set over the Great Waters. *(follow the arc of the sun down to the West-left-)* And where you now live, the sun rises *(follow the arc of the sun back up)* from the water to show clearly that all I have to give to you is my *(whisper -with gesture-)* akuko.

For some reason, this was an image that I loved and of which I was simply unwilling to let go. Something about being born in a place where the sunset is over the water and then being taken to a place where the sun and water are on the wrong side...It feels like such a radical shift and such an enormous thing to have to get used to, especially accepting that it will be all that your descendants know. This idea tugged at my heart and demanded to be central to Cato's perspective.

(Stewart receives akuko. Cupped hands move to chest. But then he is torn away - one hand extended, reaching. It falls, he turns SOUND: Hold On walks to block and pushes it upstage right. Standing beside the block as the song ends. Gestures: King. Sunset/Sunrise. Reach.)

This version of this Negro spiritual came from the 2019 film *Harriet*. It felt fitting in this moment for a character taken from his family and made to work. I think he might have found solace in music as many of the enslaved did. Also fitting that the song gives him something to hold on to, when the gesture for his part of the story comes from his being forced to let go of something. So simultaneously, letting go and holding on are part of his legacy.

Stewart: *(faint Nigerian)* Leroy, my boy. You will not have the sound of Africa in your ear as I did, but you will still have the *(whisper -with gesture-)* akukọ.

Here specifically is an idea that came from the story I wrote outlining the events of the show that seemed to resonate with the audience of my peers when I read it in class. The idea is that Africa has a sound, and that sound is being lost as the generations get further removed from their origins.

(Leroy receives akukọ -hand to chest- repeats the gesture series, as a dance almost. King. Sunset/Sunrise. Reach. Picking up the block and carrying it downstage right. Sitting and warming hands, as if by a fireside.)

Here is evidence that ideas come from everywhere, and that I was continually working on this piece subconsciously, even if not always actively. The first weekend of our winter break, I went home to Las Vegas and went camping with my family. I already had the idea that Leroy would be telling his portion of the story by the fireside, but I wasn't entirely satisfied with the gesture I had used as a placeholder for his part of the gesture series. And then I found myself warming my hands by the fireside, in the same way I have seen so many people warm their hands by the fireside. And there you have a clear, universal, or at the very least understandable, gesture. I loved that it could also be read as reflective, reminiscent of an early "get to know you" exercise we did in Dr. Nikki Yeboah's classes where we learn about each other through the things that our hands are and have done.

And then in the development of Leroy's character and my desire once again to differentiate the characters of each generation, I called upon my Archetypes training and adopted some of the physicality of the Trickster. Thus, Leroy became jaunty, jovial, and a little mischievous, all in good fun.

Leroy: (*"Negro dialect"*) Well now family, I ain't got the sound of Africa in my ear like my daddy did, but let old Leroy tell you his akukọ. Hoo-wee!

Excerpt from *Song* by Paul Laurence Dunbar

Wintah, summah, snow er shine,
Hit's all de same to me,
Ef only I kin call you mine,
An' keep you by my knee.

(standing to share this story)

Ha'dship, frolic, grief er caih,
Content by night an' day,
Ef only I kin see you whaih
You wait beside de way.

Livin', dyin', smiles er teahs,
My soul will still be free,
Ef only thoo de comin' yeahs
You walk de worl' wid me.

Once again, credit must be given to Valerie Curtis-Newton. Somehow, I walked on this earth as a Black woman for 30 years without knowing the work of Paul Laurence Dunbar (or, "my friend Paul," as Leroy refers to him). He was introduced to me as a way to access the "Negro Dialect." Because he was famous for writing the way that Black folks spoke during the era that he lived, and being able to sound like that might be a way to open doors for me to play certain roles as a Black actor. This poem spoke to the theme of Black Joy for which I was aiming. It acknowledges that there is trauma, but that there is also joy to be found, especially in being surrounded by family.

Haha! Not bad now, huh? I heard that from my friend Paul. But my little girl Harriett over there, she heard a good one, up in the big house. Get on up here girl. (*referencing the block*) Tell 'em what you heard. Tell 'em your (*no longer whispered, still with gesture*) akukọ!

(Harriett is crouched behind the block and shyly she comes out. -receives akukọ - hands to chest. Becoming less shy, aging. King. Sunset/Sunrise. Reach. Fireside. Over the course of the following, picking up the block and carrying it halfway to stage left, then setting it down to push it the rest of the way into place and sitting heavily in it and moving as if in a rocking chair.)

Harriett: (*Louisiana dialect*) My daddy loved to sing and dance around the fire and tell his stories. I was never brave as all that. But I seen and heard plenty. (*seated*) Come here babies. I'll never forget the night the family sat in the parlor of the big house reading some poems by a man they called Shakespeare. I heard them say...

Excerpt from Sonnet 29 by William Shakespeare

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,

I all alone beweep my outcast state, ...

With what I most enjoy contented least;

Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,

Haply, I think on thee, and then my state,

(Like to the lark at break of day arising

From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven's gate;

For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings

That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

(*Crown gesture. A moment of realization.*)

That Mistuh Shakespeare musta been Black. How else would he have known my condition and spoke the words I feel in my heart when I think of my family (*looking to each corner of the stage*) and how far we done come from that first akukọ. (*whisper gesture*)

If one of the points of a solo show is to showcase what we have learned in the program, then it was imperative that mine include Shakespeare. This is one of the things (along with dialect work) that I came to grad school already on fire about. And if I'm honest, I knew pretty early on that this was the Shakespeare I wanted to include for a few reasons. I heard someone talking about what had been my favorite sonnet for a number of years on an episode of the Folger Shakespeare Library's podcast discussing Black history and *could not* forget it. And then I watched on repeat as Dame Judi Dench stilled a room by reciting it on an episode of the *Graham Norton Show*. Those moments of stillness are ones that I treasure as a performer because it is in them that I know I have shifted something in the room for an audience. And doesn't Val say that the audience is the reason we do any of this anyway? And we learned from class with Amy Thone that we can just trust the text, think the thoughts, speak the words, and discover them anew each time. Another reason is that these words just happen to also work out really well

thematically because I was able to repeat the gesture of a king as a callback (and a discovery for the character of Harriett, who spoke them) to the story that started the whole thing, in a sonnet that could be interpreted as one reflective of Black life and the joy found in family.

(Eloise receives akukọ - hands to chest.) **LIGHTS shift back to starting look**

Eloise: That little girl by the fireside who heard her granddaddy sing and watched her daddy dance and listened in the big house, was my grandma Harriett. *(Crossing to pick up block and carry it back to center)* I sat at her feet and listened to her stories, and when I was old enough, I wrote them down. *(taking book from block. Sit on block, book in lap)* This is my akukọ *(whisper)* which I have related. If it be sweet sweet, *(-turn- King,)* or if it be not sweet, *(-turn- Sunset/Sunrise,)* let some come back to me *(-turn- Reach,)* and *(-turn- Fireside,)* take some *(-turn- Crown,)* elsewhere! *(pick up and open book, raise, and then hold to chest.)*

And here, another very personal element. It was in the summer of 2020 when I got more serious about finding my ancestors that I took a DNA test and found out my roots are in West Africa. I also found records that confirmed the suspicion that our German last name came from the family that owned our enslaved ancestors in Louisiana. I painstakingly tracked down a record of my great-great-grandmother, Harriett. It was crucial that her name be included in this pseudo family history story because I felt that summer that she *wanted* me to find her.

A few things that I was aiming for with my last moments on stage were reminiscent of how I received stories as a child, at the foot of an adult and being read to. Then taking those stories and continuing to pass them on, sweet or not, some returned to the family and some taken elsewhere as they are passed on to my audience. I am very grateful to our lighting designer, Alex Taylor, who made a dream of mine come true when he designed a special light cue that put a spotlight on the journal, my family stories as it were, in my outstretched hands.

SOUND: GO

LIGHTS fade.

End.

This song, “GO” from Leslie Odom Jr.'s 2023 album was another element that I knew had to be included in my show. The specific lyrics that resonated with me (from very early in my grad school career) were, "I hear the ancestors cheerin' me on/I carry them in my breath and my bones/When I'm feelin' weak/They're tellin' me/ Let's go!" And that is exactly what this degree and the creation of this show has been: my ancestors calling me, asking me to use my gifts to tell their stories, incomplete or unknown as they might be, and to keep going. I should also mention the choice our Sound Designer, Finley Brown, made to include another of Leslie Odom Jr.'s songs in our pre-show. I was the first to perform in my half of the cohort, so while the pre-show music played and I was fully in “preparation to perform” mode, I danced along backstage to him singing “Remember Black” while waiting for the “Places!” call. This helped put me in the right mindset and helped me find the ease needed to go out and fill the space with the very stories he is calling to remembrance.

In truth, the show was ultimately written in two or three days. One evening, I sat in my room with one of my housemates and we decided that we would both make progress on our projects. And that night I wrote out the story that I wanted my show to tell, outlining a character in each generation and their journey. Then, on the day after Thanksgiving, I took the story I had written and shared in Bridget’s class, and the Post-It note ideas that covered my closet door and wrote out a script. I used the empty floor space in my bedroom to walk through the ideas I had, essentially writing on my feet. I moved around my room and figured things out, then returned to my desk to record my findings.

That process never quite stopped. I printed out a script and in my subsequent rehearsals made annotations on it as I moved through the story. Because the gesture work was so specific and important, I spent a lot of time on what each gesture would be and where/when it would happen to make the storytelling the clearest it could be. I had one request for the School of Drama Production office, and that was for an acting cube-like block that was weight bearing and opened at the top on a hinge. They delivered! My costume was a dress I purchased a few years ago from a booth at an African market in Seattle Center that was made in Kenya, along with a few pieces of jewelry with some personal significance, namely a gold bracelet given to me by my paternal grandmother with an African elephant detail. And my one prop, apart from the block, was a personal journal of mine that I filled mostly with things I was grateful for between May of 2016 and June of 2019. I have plenty of filled journals; the red leather one was an aesthetic choice.

Then the tech process was hugely informative. I had not seen much of my classmates’ work (apart from an informal sharing/feedback session we did of wherever we were at in our process before the winter break) prior to our designer run at the start of our tech week. In that run, I performed most of my piece –

talking through some sections because of time constraints – with my “downstage” towards the main lobby of the Penthouse. By the end of the designer run, I had seen most of my classmates make the same choice and decided to give those in the audience a little bit of a different view. So I rotated my show ninety degrees and put my downstage towards the dressing rooms. This proved beneficial in multiple ways, some logistically, and some in regards to staging. For instance, in the sequence where Cato’s journey on a slave ship is represented, I had a longer distance to cover because it put me on the longer edge of the oval that is the Penthouse stage. That length and time felt appropriate to the story. And while the script that I wrote did not quite end up exactly matching the lighting design in performance (it was much better in reality than I could have scripted) the sound design did hold true.

My favorite thing to be able to say after an audition is “I did what I wanted to do.” That statement also seems accurate to how I feel about this show. In this iteration of the process of this show, I did not do a lot of outside sharing or workshopping. I wanted to have the story that I wanted to tell at the core of whatever it is that might get workshopped later, and this version of the script feels pure and true to what I wanted. It was only about 13 minutes long on average, but it felt complete. It was simple and specific storytelling that felt succinct and efficient. I had fun! I told a story that I enjoyed, in a way that I enjoyed. I was more delighted by the fact that people understood it than that they enjoyed it (though that is a definite bonus). And so, for this story with many beginnings, this process is now another of those beginnings. There might be a version in the future that is more based on the facts and stories of my ancestors, if I am able to track them down. Or a version that goes more into depth in the lives of the existing characters if I decide to keep it historical fiction. So while it may be the culmination of my time in grad school, something in me – maybe the same thing that keeps me returning to stories like those found in *Roots* and *Homegoing* – tells me that I will continue to work and find the true stories of my family, not just the historically fictionalized parts. And that, in truth, this is not

THE END.

Stories: A Story

A solo work by Marena Kleinpeter

LIGHTS up

(sitting cross-legged at center on a block, hands cupped over heart, eyes closed and smiling. Eyes open and hands come down. Look at the palms of the hands as they raise. An offering. Watch something cupped in the hands take off.)

(Nigerian dialect) A story, a story. Akukọ (hands to chest)

Eloise: *(My voice)* My name is Eloise, and this is my story. It might be yours too.

(Full Gesture series, in left rotation: King -turn- Sunset/Sunrise -turn- Reach-turn- Fireside -turn back to front- Crown. Hands to chest)

It begins in West Africa... five generations ago. *(Whisper gesture)* With my great-great-great-grandfather, Cato, who was born to a family of royal story tellers.

(seated on block, legs spread, hands on hips. Smiling looking from one side of the audience all the way around to the other.) **LIGHTS shift, SOUND: You are Called to Join the King's Guard**

Cato: *(Nigerian)* In the year of the Great Rain, *(standing on block)* the floods came and washed over the land. And when the water dried up, the village of Umunachi found itself prey to a great beast. But one day, a brave soldier, a son of the village, set out to slay the beast. He returned triumphant, and to honor him, the leaders of Umunachi offered the hand of their daughter to him in marriage. The two were wed, and went on to establish a village of their own, where they ruled in harmony. *(Gesture of a King.)* Their daughter was my mother. This is my story, which I have related. If it be sweet sweet, or if it be not sweet, let some come back to me, and take some elsewhere. *(Stand to bow with both hands over stomach, head only slightly inclined.)*

(Sit on opposite side of block, rest. SOUND: Oyo to the Village - abrupt wake up and kidnapping. Bondage. A ship. A crossing. A survey and hand held. As the music ends, an exhale.)

Cato: *(Nigerian)* Stewart, my son, I will tell you that where I was born the sun would set over the Great Waters. *(follow the arc of the sun down to the West-left-)* And where you now live, the sun rises *(follow the arc of the sun back up)* from the water to show clearly that all I have to give to you is my *(whisper -with gesture-)* akukọ.

*(Stewart receives akukọ. Cupped hands move to chest. But then he is torn away - one hand extended, reaching. It falls, he turns **SOUND: Hold On** walks to block and pushes it upstage right. Standing beside the block as the song ends. Gestures: King. Sunset/Sunrise. Reach.)*

Stewart: *(faint Nigerian)* Leroy, my boy. You will not have the sound of Africa in your ear as I did, but you will still have the *(whisper -with gesture-)* akukọ.

(Leroy receives akukọ -hand to chest- repeats the gesture series, as a dance almost. King. Sunset/Sunrise. Reach. Picking up the block and carrying it downstage right. Sitting and warming hands, as if by a fireside.)

Leroy: *(“Negro dialect”)* Well now family, I ain’t got the sound of Africa in my ear like my daddy did, but let old Leroy tell you his akukọ. Hoo-wee!

Excerpt from *Song* by Paul Laurence Dunbar

Wintah, summah, snow er shine,
Hit’s all de same to me,
Ef only I kin call you mine,
An’ keep you by my knee.

(standing to share this story)

Ha’dship, frolic, grief er caih,
Content by night an’ day,
Ef only I kin see you whaih
You wait beside de way.

Livin’, dyin’, smiles er teahs,
My soul will still be free,

Ef only thoo de comin' yeahs
You walk de worl' wid me.

Haha! Not bad now, huh? I heard that from my friend Paul. But my little girl Harriett over there, she heard a good one, up in the big house. Get on up here girl. (*referencing the block*) Tell 'em what you heard. Tell 'em your (*no longer whispered, still with gesture*) akukò!

(Harriett is crouched behind the block and shyly she comes out. -receives akukò - hands to chest. Becoming less shy, aging. King. Sunset/Sunrise. Reach. Fireside. Over the course of the following, picking up the block and carrying it halfway to stage left, then setting it down to push it the rest of the way into place and sitting heavily in it and moving as if in a rocking chair.)

Harriett: (*Louisiana dialect*) My daddy loved to sing and dance around the fire and tell his stories. I was never brave as all that. But I seen and heard plenty. (*seated*) Come here babies. I'll never forget the night the family sat in the parlor of the big house reading some poems by a man they called Shakespeare. I heard them say...

Excerpt from Sonnet 29 by William Shakespeare

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state, ...
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply, I think on thee, and then my state,
(Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

(Crown gesture. A moment of realization.)

That Mistuh Shakespeare musta been Black. How else would he have known my condition and spoke the words I feel in my heart when I think of my family (*looking to each corner of the stage*) and how far we done come from that first akukọ. (*whisper gesture*)

(*Eloise receives akukọ - hands to chest.*) **LIGHTS shift back to starting look**

Eloise: That little girl by the fireside who heard her granddaddy sing and watched her daddy dance and listened in the big house, was my grandma Harriett. (*Crossing to pick up block and carry it back to center*) I sat at her feet and listened to her stories, and when I was old enough, I wrote them down. (*taking book from block. Sit on block, book in lap*) This is my akukọ (*whisper*) which I have related. If it be sweet sweet, (*-turn- King.*) or if it be not sweet, (*-turn- Sunset/Sunrise.*) let some come back to me (*-turn- Reach.*), and(*-turn- Fireside.*) take some (*-turn- Crown.*) elsewhere! (*pick up and open book, raise, and then hold to chest.*)

SOUND: GO

LIGHTS fade.

End.