

Dreaming of the Great Migration

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Abstract

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Dreaming of the Great Migration is a hybrid of literary fiction, poetry, images and familial interviews that intersects and fills the space in between my families' migration story and the imaginative and creative characters of *North*, a projected literary novel that I hope to complete in my continuous exploration of fiction writing.

Dreaming of the Great Migration

North

Graduating day at the Lincoln Institute blurred in her mind just as much as the first day she had arrived. Noreen didn't succumb to the butterflies or the tears that she had seen welling up in the eyes of the many different families that packed into the hot gym that day. Her mind drifted off into the days, the weeks ahead that would lead her to the place up north that would soon be her home. This day was supposed to happen. She could see that in the eyes of the families that came to celebrate that this day was special. There were not a lot of Negro youth from the county that chose or had a chance to be a part of this historical institute. It was a privilege. But Noreen refused to celebrate, to celebrate meant it was done, meant you had succeeded. But there was so much more.

"Ya Ma came," whispered Claudia.

"You didn't think she'd come, did ya?" A grave smile appeared across Noreen's face as she squinted her eyes to survey the crowd in front of her. Noreen's soft hands grew clammy as she gripped the black chairs that neatly sat in front of her row of graduates. She slightly lifted her tightly stretched calves to support the search for her mom in the crowd. Her mom had traveled 250 miles in the family blue Chevy truck that was left by her father for such occasions. A three-hour trip from Bakerton to Simpsonville was all Noreen's mom could muster up the

strength to travel. She was not use to the distance. She needed to bring her friend Mary Ann from across the way to carry some of the burden of driving so far and so long. Her husband had always told her that it was not safe for her to be making trips outside of Bakerton alone.

“Who knows what you get ya self into outside of the people you know, “he would always say.

Noreen’s mom’s usual route was from Bakerton’s countryside to the town of Burksville just a couple of miles there and back. One to two times a week for the usual things the family couldn’t grow in the field or find at the local store. Included in that route was her weekend pickups from her steady clientele that brought extra cash flow to the family, sustaining them and providing opportunities such as furthering their daughter’s education. Between the money coming from her father’s tenure at High grade in Indianapolis and her mom’s small business ironing clothes for the white folks in the surrounding area, Noreen’s family did alright for themselves.

Mary Ann and Noreen’s mom had to drive to Simpsonville without stops. The embarrassment of getting turned away for food, gas and the restroom was the reality for all Negros who traveled outside of the places they lived. It wasn’t just embarrassment but it was a fight for safety when traveling. They were two women who were not going to be made a fool out of, they were not made to hold their tongues. At least not for Noreen’s mom. Mary Ann was a little softer. One a little more rational in the moment than the other. Knowing that about themselves made the decision easier for the both of them to just drive.

Noreen had received her acceptance letter to Indiana Central College. Her mom was the first of her parents to share the exciting news. Noreen’s mom held her emotions tight, but

there were moments like this where her rules of survival didn't apply, they couldn't apply. Her tears poured down like a rainy Midwest day. It was the most Noreen had seen her mom cry, but the tears that day were for her only daughter. It was for her daughter Noreen, the first in her and her husband's family to have the opportunity to receive education outside of the eighth grade. The college was located in the heart of the city. The stories shared by her father led her to believe that the city was booming with so much opportunity. A fascinating music scene right on Indiana Ave that sprawled with so many successful colored entrepreneurs, the biggest name being Madam CJ Walker. All of it ready for the taking. Noreen already imagined herself there in the midst of all the excitement, but what excited her and made her most nervous was the significant amount of time she would be spending with her father. For the majority of her life, in her subconscious her father was a voice of wisdom, authority and discipline but at this point in her life she would see him differently. The next four years she would have spent more time with her father than she really ever had growing up. His job took him away from the home and his family except for vacations, holidays and weekends when he could catch the greyhound. He called every night after work to check on his wife, Noreen and the farm. He was a steady and calm voice of reason. Noreen and her Mom felt that, even on a day like today.

“Suzy Q. You should be proud of ya self today. Ya know I won't be there to celebrate with you but Mary Ann and ya Ma will be. Ya know I'm proud of ya.”

“I know, “Noreen said.

“Now you still got my address in Ind-a-napolis? I'll meet you at the downtown bus station tomorrow. Me and My buddy from the factory gonna pick you up at 1 and we'll get you settled in at the place.”

“Thanks Daddy. I’ll see you then.”

“Alright bye Suzy Q. Give ya ma my love. Tell Mary Ann don’t mess up my truck.”

The conversation replayed in her mind as she spotted the two seats in the middle of the third row of a crowd of about 80 people. The high arch of her mom’s thin black eyebrows moving the wrinkles of her brown forehead to the tip of her long dark hair revealed great pride. Noreen waved at her mom and Mary Ann as they sat with their backs erect in the sand colored folding chairs that accompanied all of the proud families. They both waved back, Mary Ann half way standing up as if she was too excited to know what to do with herself. As the students took their seats on the mobile stage, so did the families.

“It’s a surprise they came all this way, I told momma not to drive that far, “Noreen whispered to Claudia.

“My Ma and Daddy couldn’t make the drive their cars been given them trouble but we gonna have a get togetha when I get home. If you and ya ma can make the drive, you should come,”

“We would love to Claudia,” said Noreen

“I’ll talk to my Momma and Mary Ann after the ceremony.”

“Ok,” Claudia said.

Claudia, in one sweeping motion directed her attention to the podium as the founding President and principal Whitney M. Young took the podium.

“Bop, Bop, Bop!”

“Attention everyone,” said the principal.

The loud tapping noise of the microphone focused everyone's attention to the podium.

"Today is a special day."

His voiced echoed off the walls of the gym, as he spoke with an assertive confidence. Not arrogance. But a belief that this group of students could change the landscape of America. Every graduating class that came through those doors had hope, the same hope that Noreen and Claudia felt in that moment, the same hope President Young wished for them to have.

"I can't believe we did it!" Claudia said to Noreen.

Noreen smiled with her arm snugged tightly around Claudia's neck.

"Babby! You did it!" Mary Ann screamed with an affectionate kiss on Noreen's cheek.

Noreen's mom slowly embraced her daughter's cheeks with her warm hands. She looked in her eyes, holding back the tears.

"My sweet baby girl." Noreen's mom said.

Noreen embraced her.

"Oh Momma. You gonna make me cry."

Dreaming of the Great Migration

Through my great Aunt's eyes

Troy: *What was she like?*

Great Aunt: *Pretty woman. Had to fight all the boys because she was beautiful. She had long beautiful hair, wasn't many women as pretty like her in Burkesville.*



Dreaming of the Great Migration

North

After the ceremony, she was just a couple of days from making her excursion to Indianapolis. Just as room was made for her so was it for her father. The woman he had rented from in Indianapolis had an extra room for Noreen to comfortably lay her head for the next four years. Her father had worked at High Grade meat packing company for the past 18 years and had been renting from this woman for the same amount of time. The landlord and her family had been renting rooms for colored commuters who couldn't find housing and worked at High Grade alongside her husband. The Great Migration continued to bring waves of Black workers from the south up into the North even if their "North", which most considered the Midwest was approximately 3-4 hours away. It was something, to see a culture shift from one state line to another.

"Did you ask ya Ma?", Claudia said.

"Haha. No I didn't get a chance to you silly," Noreen said.

Claudia's brown lips puckered on one side of her face and her hazel eyes stared at Noreen with great delight.

"Come on girl," she said.

"Ok, ok don't get all fussy with me now," Noreen smiled.

"Momma you know Claud and her folks are having a get togetha right here in Simpsonville to celebrate. You and Mary Ann want to go? Momma please?" Noreen said.

“Baby girl now you know you have to catch that bus early in the morning to head to Indianapolis.”

“Momma we won’t stay long.”

“Let that child go, “said Mary Ann.

“Ok. Ok we can go but we need to head back before it starts getting too dark. You know how them people are.”

Joy leaped from her dark green eyes as Noreen hugged her mom. Noreen turned around to catch Claudia’s reaction. Claudia didn’t waste time before grabbing Noreen by her petite wrist and gently pulling her along just like the first day at the Institute. Noreen always knew what she wanted but the way Claudia knew the landscape, the people and how to maneuver the world fascinated Noreen. Claudia would introduce Noreen to everyone she knew even though she was also a new student. Those from Claudia’s town of Simpsonville quickly grew acquainted with the shy small-town girl from Bakerton. Most had never heard of Bakerton because of the size. They were more familiar with Burkesville which was mostly known for its all Black summer festivals. The families would gather in the summers and release all their worries. It was the biggest thing they looked forward to. A festival that brought local and sometimes lengthy commuters, it always felt like a big family reunion. The main attraction being the outdoor movie and fresh buttery corn on the cob sold by the local farmers. Noreen’s father’s fresh corn was always amongst the most impressive. Bright golden corn that slid off the cob like pulling perfectly cooked ribs off the bone. The smell that sent you to an indoor movie theater full of freshly popped popcorn. After taking one mouthwatering bite your imagination would take you to the kitchen table of your families Sunday meals, the corn complimenting the collard

greens, the macaroni and cheese, the lightly fried pork chops and the hot water cornbread. The taste buds in your mouth conducting a symphony, perfectly in tune. Just like the locals it was Noreen's favorite.

Dreaming of the Great Migration

Through my Great Aunt's eyes

Troy: *Tell me about the school and where it was located?*

Great Aunt: *Lincoln Ridge Kentucky. The city of Burkesville would rent a bus and send them to Lincoln ridge Institute. Students had to pack all their clothes up and stay until September. There was a boy's dorm and a girl's dorm. The state sponsored Lincoln ridge High School, good teachers. A few kids would come from foreign countries. The state didn't believe in mixing the races. Lincoln Institute was a 4-year High school in Simpsonville Kentucky 250 miles from Burkesville, Kentucky.*

Troy: Can you tell me more about her?

Great Aunt: She taught and they loved her and she taught for two years, Sunday until Friday.



Dreaming of the Great Migration

North

“Let’s go ya’ll my family is gonna be so excited that yall coming. Yall have enough room in the truck so I don’t have to walk?”

“Of course, chil—d we have room. Noreen baby girl you gonna drive though,” said Noreen’s mom.

“Ok momma.”

Claudia’s home was about 10 miles walking distance from the Institute, 20 miles round trip. Noreen’s excitement toward spending time with Claudia’s family distracted her from the trip North and the mental adjustments that inevitably would cloud her mind. The same feeling that she felt the start of each school year at the institute. The first year was by far the hardest, each year becoming a bit better but never relieving her of that feeling of displacement. She could always see the plan ahead. She could always make sense of why all of these sacrifices were working together for the things that she wanted. These years prepared her as much as they could but there was so much in store that she could not see. Nothing her father expressed or what she had heard from the locals who had traveled to Indianapolis could completely prepare her for that trip North. More specifically the settlement up North.

She knew that this four-year trip wouldn’t be temporary. Indianapolis would eventually become her permanent home. She didn’t know if that had settled in everyone’s mind. They had hopes of her one day coming back after she had enough of her adventures and settling back down in Kentucky, marrying and having kids. Noreen knew that wasn’t it for her. She was an

eagle amongst birds. She needed more. She wanted more. Curiosity and truth drove her like an engine, to places that went undiscovered by most in her community. A community filled with buried desires and flatten hopes. They settled for what was in front of them because the world wasn't going to give them more. The hopes of moving and traveling to far off places, owning businesses, dreams of taking care of the sick in the community, or simply visiting the town a couple of miles away without the gnawing feeling of danger. Noreen's parents melted into the some of the same setbacks and plunder bestowed on so many Negro communities, but saw the world slightly opening up in different pockets of the United States for young Negro women. They wanted those same opportunities to be at the feet of their daughter because they knew from the moment they laid eyes on her that she was special. It wasn't a kind of special that all parents see in their first-born child. It was a type of special that everyone who encountered her saw. An ability to catch on to concepts quickly, the emotional empathy to grant others confidence in themselves by her presence and a persistence that would drive her into the dangers of Jim Crowism if she believed enough in the vision. She possessed the type of special that had to be cultivated in unique spaces and heaven-sent opportunities such as a boarding school, although far away allowing her eyes to open a little bit wider.

Noreen, Claudia and Mary Ann walked from the gym to the parking lot south of the Institute. The gravel road wrapped around pristine metal gates like they were leaving an old southern mansion. Noreen slowed her pace once she reached her hand out toward the shiny silver handle of the families blue Chevy truck. She slowly looked around, taking in the hundred-year-old Sycamore trees that protected the school like pawns protecting their queen. Noreen looked at the Institute just in their horizon and took a deep breath. Air filling her lungs and

slowly releasing. The smell of wood stoves burning from the towns morning breakfast. She opened the door and took one last small glance at the school that had groomed so many colored leaders and professionals. She was now an official part of that legacy, her name forever cemented in rebellion and hope.

Noreen placed her hand on the white leather steering wheel as she turned the keys to the ignition. The engine revved up like an old lawn mower melodies quickly jolting toward her ear drums. Predictable tune of the local news, always playing on the radio in the car, always playing on the radio in the kitchen. She looked back to see if her rear was clear and to the kind smiles of the occupants in the back seat. Noreen's mom slightly rotated the metal lever towards her. The window went down just enough for her to place her hand outside of the window to feel the cool breeze on her fingertips. Noreen smiled and did the same, her right hand placed perfectly North on the steering wheel and her left hand out of the window, finger tips dancing with the wind.

"Your gonna take a slight right at this sign and follow this road for about 5 miles."

"Ok. Yall doin alright back there?"

"We fine bebe."

"We are good Noreen," said Claudia

Simpsonville was an older town similar to Burkesville. The same drugstores, hair parlors, taverns and diners. They were passing through at the busiest time of the day around 12 when housewives would do their shopping and gather all the necessities for the week. The colored women moved with a type of efficiency, alertness and dignity as they walked down the sidewalks passing the white folks. Noreen could see her mom's body transition to the same

alertness as they passed the town square and slowed for the pedestrians. Making their way outside of the main square to the outskirts they could see the slow changes from paved roads and fine manicured lawns to a dusty main road with tall grass leading them to train tracks that separated the town. After passing the first couple of homes they arrived at Claudia's family home. A wide white one-story home with a big beautiful front yard. A welcoming site with a garden bed full of yellow daisies and white tulips protected by a 5-inch white fence neatly aligned on both sides of the front door. The surrounding neighbors made up a diverse soiree of homes; some as beautiful or even more beautiful than Claudia's and others were merely shacks. All of the homes greeted by the dusty road that stretched at least 5 to 10 miles out. Claudia's home was surround by a swarm of vehicles parked along the dusty road, in the driveway and in the front yard.

Dreaming of the Great Migration

Through my great Uncle's eyes

Troy: Tell me a little bit about Lincoln Institute from your perspective?

Great Uncle: *Lincoln Institute was like a college. It had been ah. Berea college was a school that was really integrated. It's funny how integration wasn't frowned on as much in some areas in different places as it was later on, It's, it's funny. By 19- uh, black uh African Americans had went to Berea college. It was outside of Lexington Kentucky. But then, I guess pressure from uh white goofs had decided that didn't want blacks to go to Berea College anymore or something so they started uh boarding school for African Americans. From 1911 all the way through the high school, if you didn't live in Louisville or Lexington or other places where they didn't have African American high schools in Kentucky. Students were uh went to Lincoln Institute in the county who didn't have a black high school would pay their fair or pay their way. Lincoln was like, had a boy's dormitory and a girl's dormitory about a quarter of a mile apart or maybe not that far bout an eighth of a mile apart. On one side. It was a nice school. It was almost like, cause back in those days in the thirty's and forties it was almost like a college. It had a great sports program. In high school, getting a high school diploma in those days was like getting a college degree. Cause very few African American and blacks and white people to that extent didn't have high school degrees cause a lot people. The rural farming communities that needed their sons to work on the farm. [REDACTED] did not go. He was smart, he finished 8th grade but I think he got his high school in the military. Kids would go to Lincoln from Burkesville, who really wanted to further their education. You know like uh, and like I say the kids in Burkesville, Bakerton and Marybone and Burkesville they would go to Linco [REDACTED] had a cousin na [REDACTED]. They both were really pretty girls.*



Dreaming of the Great Migration

North

“Just park in front of that truck right there, said Claudia.”

They all stepped out of the truck and followed Claudia to the front door. The door was wide open expecting the many visitors that arrived for the special occasion. They had been waiting all day for the guest of honor to arrive. Greeting them with the same energy for life was Claudia’s Mom.

“My baby’s here! Yall my baby’s here! Let me see you. You did it. I don’t know what to say I’m so proud of you!

“Oh Mama,” Claudia said as she embraced her.

“You remember Noreen, her mama and Mary Ann.”

“Of course, I remember them baby.” It’s good to see yall.

A crowd of people began to make their way toward Claudia and her guest. Noreen, her Mom and Mary Ann were embraced like they were family, everyone from old to young. A sight of faces continued to gather. Noreen slightly stepped back as if she were embracing herself to jump in the Ohio River. She smiled and politely introduced herself with a familiar nervousness that came with the lack of a huge family. Her Mom displaying the same hesitancy but Mary Ann was in her element. Taking charge like a body guard.

“Come to the back so I can get yall some food,” Claudia’s Mom said.

“Claudia, you take care of Noreen and I’ll take care of my ladies.”

“Come on Noreen. I’ll take you to see daddy before we get you a plate.”

Noreen didn't say much but just embraced the burst of energy that was coming her way from every direction. It would be awhile before she found her footing.

"Noreen it's been a long-time. How's ya old man doing? Still working hard, I see."

Claudia's father was a 6-foot burly man with the biggest hands Noreen had ever seen. Brown medium roast coffee skin with the aroma of oil from a car garage and chewing tobacco. An oddly rather pleasant smell. Just like her father he had been recruited to work away from home. He worked in a car manufacturing plant in Louisville a two-hour commute, during the week he would stay with family in Louisville and would come back home on the weekends. Every time Claudia's father saw Noreen he made it a point to talk about her father. He knew about the sacrifices of commuting and being without your family in order to provide a decent living. Those sacrifices he knew all too well. How hard it was to find work in the towns. How hard it was to find homes. How hard it was to maintain both.

"He's doing just fine. You know they working him day and night in that city."

"Oh, I know they are. Claudia told me yous about to go to school there."

"Yea I got accepted to Indiana Central College. They gave me a scholarship. I'm thinking that I'm going to study journalism."

"Well I'll say! I know ya people proud of you girl."

"I'll be heading there tomorrow."

"You taking the hound or you taking the truck?"

"I'm going to take the greyhound."

"We'll be careful on those stops. Make sure you know what places you can eat at and wash cause you know they don't care."

“Daddy she knows how to take care of herself, don’t worry about her.”

“You know I’m just tryna look out for the girl. That’s all D.”

“I know daddy but she’s fine. Aint you Noreen.”

“Yea I’ll be fine. More than anything I’m excited.”

“I trust that you are. I know you’ll be fine. D always told me how smart you are. An I know that she don’t hang out with just anybody. Yall took care of each other all four of those years. It was hard to have my D gone so much but I know it was for that education. Now we got to convince her to stay put. Four more years she’ll, then we gone get my D back here.

“I won’t be too far daddy. I’ll just be at Kentucky State over there in Lexington.”

“I know D I just want you back here with ya Mama you know she gets lonely. Noreen are you goin back to Bakerton after you done?”

“I don’t believe so sir. I don’t know what is ahead just yet but I think I’m gonna stay in Indianapolis for a while well after I finish to figure it out.”

“I’m just gone say one thing and I will shut my mouth. Ya Mama needs you. Ya Daddy needs you. Kentucky needs you. Remember that. Now go get some food ova there on that table.”

Claudia’s father pointed his thick brown finger to the table of food that planted itself at the back drop of the party, next to the smoky grill. Noreen followed after Claudia embracing the steady life of the party. Family from all over huddled around in groups laughing with abandon. Hanging on to every word as if this was the last time they would see each other. Although nervous in the beginning Noreen could feel the warmth of the cool summer day. Warmth that came from her belly easing out onto her skin. This was freedom. She looked around to see how

her mom and Mary Ann had been getting along. The laugh coming from Mary Ann brought a second wave of ease to Noreen.

The table in front of her had everything imaginable. It was Sunday meals and Thanksgiving wrapped in one. The two grey oak tables placed side by side formed one long table that protruded the food like a deity offering. It had every category of food imaginable. You had your deserts on the right side and you had your main courses and on the other. Claudia began to put together Noreen's plate and her own. They found their way to the living room where there was less of a crowd. As soon as Claudia sat down on the couch she broke the silence.

"So, you're heading to Indianapolis tomorrow? When will we ever have time to see each other?" Imma be at Kentucky State and coming home as often as I can and you gonna be 4 hours away."

"Oh, Claudia we will see each other I'm sure of it, even if it is the summer time when I come visit."

"Girl you know summer time is so far away. You done had tons of your college friends by then and forget about oh little me and ya home of Kentucky. But I know you chasing after what you want just like I am. I just wish we wasn't doing it so far apart."

Noreen laid her plate down on the coffee table in front of them, hugged Claudia and kissed her on the forehead. "I'll be back. I'll make sure of it and it will be like we never left one another."

Noreen held her a little longer as she felt her friends head collapse on her shoulder. Noreen gently began to rub her back. Claudia looked up. Her hand gripping around Noreen's deceptively toned bicep.

Claudia's face still looking down and still gripping Noreen's bicep "I know you have to chase after what you want. You have always had that in you ever since I met you. That determination. That fearlessness that I never had. I have just always been too scared to go too far from my family."

"But Claud you did it for four years and your about to do it for four more. You're not that much different. You just as determined."

"No girl I was terrified and I cried every night in my room. You always had this way about you. That this was what you were made for. To go off and not let anything get in the way of what you wanted. I saw that in you every day at school. Determined girl. Determined."

Noreen sat still, looking in Claudia's hazel eyes. The room faded as if it was never there. Then suddenly jolted back into place. Noreen could hear herself swallow and could feel her saliva lubricate the inside of her throat. Stunned as if she didn't already know this about herself, Noreen looked, holding back tears.

"You not coming back are you?"

"I'm gonna try to make it back every chance I get Claud.

"That's not what I mean. Kentucky is not your home anymore. You have already made your home there, haven't you?"

"Claudia, who knows what the world has for us. Who knows what's going to happen in the next four years."

Claudia looked in Noreen's eyes.

"You right but I can see it, and you don't need to be making a foo of ya best friend."

"Oh Claudia."

“No, no don’t Claudia me I just need you to tell me. I don’t want to get my heart broken later on.

“Your right I don’t have plans to come back, not permanently at least. I want to make my new home in Indianapolis. You know, make the most out of the opportunity.”

Claudia looked away as tears ran from her eyes, still holding on to Noreen’s arm.

“Indianapolis is getting a special somebody. But Kentucky will always be here for you, it will always be your home.”

Noreen smiled and embraced Claudia like it was the last time she was going to see her. Their bodies so warm. Tears now running from both of their eyes, taking every second to wipe them.

Noreen unwrapped her hands and sat herself up right on the couch, legs crossed as if that was the posture that she had the entire time. She caught her breath and began to control it again.

Noreen cupped her nose as if she had a nose bleed and got up to walk to the restroom. She looked at Claudia and began to ask about the restroom. Claudia knowing Noreen’s default to at all times be presentable stopped her before the strain in her voice attracted others to run to her aid.

“Down the hall to the right,” she said with a smile.

Noreen reflected on her face in the mirror. The tears added extra moisture to a well moisturized face. She knew how difficult this time would be but moments like this stunned her. She hoped that the hardest moments would be left for her Mom, but the relationships she had formed outside of her family had come with vulnerability and reliance. The independents and focus that she held so deeply leaked, revealing the cracks in places that had been unknown to her. Her friend knew her. Noreen allowed herself to be known. A scary but freeing feeling

knocked on the door of her chest. It wasn't enough to say that she would miss this place. Kentucky was her no matter where she went. No matter how hard Kentucky tried to contain her and make her out to be what she was not, the lies it placed on all colored people. She finally took her claim of the place that treated her like a mere guest. Noreen stepped out the bathroom slowly gathering herself. She walked back to the couch finding Claudia drifting off into her own thoughts while mindlessly eating. Noreen sat down focused on changing the mood. After all she left tomorrow so it was only right to make the most out of the time they had left. Claudia shifted her mind back in focus as Noreen embraced her with both arms. She wrapped her skinning arms around Claudia's neck and placed her chin on the edge of her shoulder.

“Winter break?”

“Huh?”

“Imma ask Momma if she can come get me and Daddy up from Indianapolis so we can pick you up on the way back. Imma come to Simpsonville cause you know we have about a month or two for winter break. We can go to our spots in Marybone.”

Claudia smiled.

“We are gonna be fine.

“We.

Are.

Going.

To.

Be.

Fine.”

“I know we will be, but everybody not built like you girl. Ya head is filled with so many dreams that it doesn’t even seem like you fazed. But I know. I know. I just need some time.”

Claudia knew her well. The dreams that filled her mind, the adventures that she hoped for sprang from the nights, mornings and weekends of books that surrounded her bed. The characters and narratives that shaped her fueled an imagination that wasn’t going to be contained. The stories her Father would tell her about the city and the many folks that she encountered in the town and at the Institute that would tell her about the grand world that surrounded little old Kentucky. All of this time they were telling her to live. She listened closely. So, she had no other choice but to live. “I promise I won’t forget about yall,” the sentence formed on her lips but the words didn’t come out. A reminder for herself. A conversation between the heart and the mind.

“Baby girl, we have to head out soon.”

“Where’s Mary Ann at?”

“She ova there still gossipin away, ha ha. That girl can talk.”

“I know she can Mama, haha.”

“Yall don’t be talking bout Mary Ann like that, shoot you coulda been talkin bout me, we know we all got that gossip talk in us. But we are talkin bout Mary Ann so that’s a different story. Neva mind, hahaha. “

“You sho right, but you so silly Claudia. I’m gonna miss you coming ova on yall break and tellin me how good my gravy and biscuits are!”

“Aww don’t say it, you gonna start makin me tear up again.”

“You have been such a good friend to my baby all these years, I don’t know what she gonna do without you.”

Claudia grabbed Noreen’s arm, their cheeks closing in and shoulders aligning like a perfect horizon. Their eyes squinting as though they were posing for a picture.

“Y’all silly, but I know ya gonna be alright.”

“Alright I guess I’ll let y’all go. I’ll walk y’all out. You know it’s getting too late, so Pa gonna have one of the men take y’all at least half way home.”

“Child, we fine.”

“Just preparing you, he aint gonna take no for an answer.”

“Well he gone get one today.”

“Oh, mama don’t be stubborn, you know what Daddy would say.”

Noreen’s Ma rolled her eyes and started moving toward the back door where the conversations grew louder. The sun still bright, two hours before touching the horizon. They had quite a trip ahead of them before arriving to Bakerton. Noreen’s Ma shoulders tensed and she started nervously closing and extending her fingers. Noreen could see the nervousness seeping out of her Ma. She questioned if it was the drive home or the countdown to her leaving. Maybe both?

“Ya’ll leavin already,” asked Claudia’s Ma?

“Yea we gotta at least get to Burkesville before it gets dark and we gotta get this girl ready for Ind-inapolis tomorrow. Her bus leaves the first thing in the morning.”

“I wish y’all could stay longer but I understand.”

“Yea you gotta let them get outta here that sun is set to hit that horizon in a couple hours”

The voice of Claudia's dad's baritone voice gently escorted her mom's exuberant speech into the back of the room like a parent telling their child to "go play" while grownups are talking. It wasn't harsh at all and she understood more than anyone how the conversation would then turn. He didn't speak very much but when he did, it mattered.

"I'm gonna have James and Dewyte, Claud's uncles drive with yall to make sure yall safe."

"Aw that won't be....."

"Ma," Noreen interrupted. Noreen softly shook her head and her Mom's pride began to evaporate. She knew what her baby girl was thinking, "you know what daddy would say." Noreen's Ma would eventually give in but it wasn't in her to not at least put up a fight. She knew how harsh this world was and she didn't need anyone to convince her.

"Ok. It's settled. Is it ok if James drive ya truck?"

The conversation from then on would be filled with hypothetical questions or just questions that were curtesy's unless they had better arraignments.

"I'll have James drive yall and Dewyte will take my truck and drive behind, so once you get to a comfortable spot they can let you take it from there."

Noreen's Ma and Mary Ann nodded.

"Alright let's go," Noreen said.

"Hey Dewyte and James yall come on ova here!?"

Claudia ran over hastily hugging Noreen. Throwing all of her weight into Noreen's small frame. Noreen locked her heels into the soft grass and slightly bent her knees embracing her like a wrestler using everything she had not to topple over. Mary Ann and Noreen's Ma made their

rounds of hugs and kisses to the guest and embraced the host's a little longer. Their daughters had been best friends for four long years. Every school function, every get together, every sleep over came down to a single heartfelt "Thank you." The protection and friendship that was shared between this family had been all they needed to push through hardships of thrusting their baby girls into a part of the world at such an early age, without the protection and proximity of their mother's and father's.

Uncle James ran to his automobile and grabbed something stark black hanging in the back. He tucked it underneath his armpit and ran toward the truck. It was quite visible for everyone to see but discreet enough that it took a while to make out what it was. James opened the driver's side door and placed it right beside him.

"I know yall don't have any place to hang it so I'll just set it right here, hopefully we don't need to use it tonight. Mary Ann and Noreen's Mom sat comfortably in the back. "We mighty grateful to you for doing this Mr. James," Noreen's Mom said.

"No problem at all Ma'am. We gotta make sure yall get to Bakerton without no trouble, you know you got ya Dr. right here to take care of. We can't let nothing stop that potential."

"Oh yes," both Mary Ann and Noreen's Mom agreed.

"Yall are something else," Noreen said.

"You ready Dewyte," James yelled out of the window. The horn from the car behind signaled that they were all ready to go. The group from the house began to make their way to the front lawn. They all waved in sync like they were fans at a baseball game. Noreen waved and blew a kiss to everyone.

“Bye girl, I’ll see you soon,” Noreen yelled out of the passenger side of the truck. An assurance Noreen knew she couldn’t guarantee but she was all the more hopeful. The dusty road entrance soon became their exit toward Bakerton.

Dreaming of the Great Migration

Through my great Uncle's eyes

Troy: *Oh yea? Tell me about him. Tell me about the place they grew up in?*

Great Uncle: *1945-46 after the world war let's see he was about 18. I believe my mother, I don't know if she had to sign for him to go, don't think so, so he went into the army. But before that, you know when he was 13 or 14, that area 14-15 years old. Burkesville had a movie and on Saturday and Burkesville was a good size place by then but it's not now. You had a so many people uh from all realms of county come to town on Saturday and it was like packed. They would bring their mule wagon and their children and they would shop, stay all day long and the kids would run wild, the country kids it was like they were going to the city. Bakerton, you know Bakerton had, you know where [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] was born a pretty good size black community or African American. They had a school, you know an elementary school. Integration didn't come in so if you had to go to high school you would either go to a place in Kentucky or out of state or out of state where you had family that had high school. There was a high school in Kentucky, I went to briefly. My sister, two sisters [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] and my older brother [REDACTED]. They all graduated from Lincoln Institute. The same school your grandmother graduated from there.*



“No whites and a lot of Black families.”

Dreaming of the Great Migration

North

The sound of the engine drummed to the low fading voices on the radio. The smell of Uncle James cologne began to acquaint itself to the blue leathered seats, gradually seeping into the leathered fabric. The smell accompanied Noreen throughout their car ride. She turned and looked out the slightly cracked window that blew in the fresh pine air. The air made the cologne a little more bearable. Her eyes began to grow heavy as the trees passed by, one after another. One after another. One after another. Noreen's mind fading in and out of her recent and distant memories. Those special moments at the celebration, graduation and at the institute. She allowed her mind to just wonder, eventually to experiences not yet spoken for and places not yet seen. Her eyes grew heavy and opened repeatedly until the darkness guided her into a state rest.

Dreaming of the Great Migration

Crime against Womxn is a horrific part of our history

A history that is hard for us to confront. Hard for us to see.

At this time, we are seeing that

Power has always been in the hands of Womxn

Even if our view of power resembled a hierarchy that would eventually be our Country's demise.

Mother nature is fighting back and silencing us all, patience is what she's asking

Of us. Be patient with yourself, love one another, be grateful and most important

Shift the power.

Patriarchy and **White Supremacy** has silenced the voices of our Mothers and our sisters for far too long.

How am I? A man. Socialized to uphold patriarchy, contributing to this silence.

I am working to ask more questions and to finally listen to these powerful beings

That raised me, fought through nine months of pain and forged me into the human

I am.

Mom, Aunt, sisters, nieces, cousins, my partner are symbols of force. We must honor them

Somehow, someday.

Dreaming of the Great Migration

North

“Baby wake up. Baby wake up.”

The voice startled Noreen into attention as a warm hand grabbed her shoulder. Noreen looked out amongst the trees, the horizon painted across the night sky. Noreen wiped the sweat from her forehead and looked down at her watch. It was a quarter until 6. They had been on the road for a couple of hours. She looked over and was surprised to see Uncle James still sitting in the driver’s seat. Noreen eased her back from the comfort of the seat slowly looking around in confusion, reason being that Uncle James should have been heading back to the party with Dewyte.

“Straighten ya self-up.”

“Momma what’s going on?”

“They stopped us. Just hold ya tongue, James gonna take care of it.”

Her mom’s voice held steady just like the grip on her daughter’s shoulder. Noreen looked at James, Mary Ann and then her Mom.

“We gonna be alright yall,” James said.

“Where’s Dewyte,” Mary Ann asked?

“He’s about a mile ahead of us, he gonna slow down.”

Noreen looked ahead for Dewyte’s car and began to make out the red break lights up ahead. He had fully stopped on the left junction of the road with the dust settling around the sleek black

trunk of his automobile. Noreen then began to focus her attention on the rear-view mirror that strayed her away from confusion to a sickening feeling in her gut as the florescent red and blue lights blinked without control and all the more with all control. She slowly turned from her right to her left to look over her shoulder out of the rear window. Her eyes never blinking, the stiffness of the air in the truck made it hard for her to breath. Uncle James slowly placed his slightly trembling hand on the black object that separated them and used his free hand to roll down the window. He then strategically placed both hands in a 10 to 2 position and looked straight ahead in the distance. Uncle James took a deep breath filling his lungs with an excessive amount of air as if he were plunging his body into the sea.

“Tap! Tap!”

The firm grip of Noreen’s mom’s hand slowly slid off her moist shoulders. Affirming what everyone already knew, sudden movements come with a cost. The blue piercing eyes looked through the window and tapped again. The sight of the hand gun waving in a downward motion to roll down the window communicated all that they needed to hear. Noreen clasped her hands together to somehow stop her hands from sweating and to calm herself. The silence and the piercing blue eyes gave way to an anticipatory torture, a slow aching of lost control. A full body plunge into a rose bed of thorns. They all breathed together.

“Yes officer, sir.”

“Boy do you know where yall at?”

Dewyte abruptly switched the gear of his automobile into park. He looked at his watch and squinted his eyes to figure out why they had stopped. This wasn’t the area they said they would stop. They had at least twenty minutes or so until James and him needed to switch cars.

“Dammit! Shit,” Dewyte said.

The blue and red blinking lights shined even more elaborately as darkness began to overtake everything that they had left behind. They were still reaching for the horizon that covered them with a thin blanket of safety. They still had time but he understood the game more than any of them. His daily commute took him from Simpsonville to the town, Marybone. He knew the rules well. Marybone gave him the only opportunity he had for a convenience store. It was a majority all black community where he could easily set up shop. The business ran successfully off the inhabitants of the community. In the eyes of the surrounding towns it ran like a renegade town. It brought black folks from all over to enjoy the popular underground moonshine liquor that they mostly sold at the music club. The club was known for bringing some popular acts into the scene giving the town a little more glamour than it humbly asked for but the bad roads going in to the town kept a distance between the outsiders, between those who knew and didn't know. Marybone was the destination for Dewyte and James a place where they could either stay for the night to make the trek back to Simpsonville in the morning or ride back through the night if they were feeling safe enough to do so. They were fifteen minutes from the entrance of the road that separated them from Marybone, and only the entrance. It took another twenty to get past the road but the hope was to have James get in the car with them and see Noreen and her family as they drove off into Burkesville where they would could easily make their way home to Bakerton. But this situation could change his hope into a nightmare. Dewyte looked at his watch again. He looked at the sun slowly setting. He began to grab his hand gun out of the glove compartment. He wiped his hand on the glazed sweat of his mustache and held his hand against his chin, contemplating. Before making the

lunge, he looked out the rear window. He looked and he waited for the signal. Fifteen minutes until sunset. Fifteen minutes until Marybone. Fifteen minutes.

“Yes, sir we do,” James responded.

“If you know where yall at then why are yall here?”

James looked straight ahead but Noreen kept her eyes on the blue-eyed sheriff. The back seats of the truck grew more silent as night air before the first snow fall. The sheriff’s eyes punctured Uncle James skin like a knife. His blue eyes intensely investigating James, the inside of the truck, the women in the back, Noreen and then back at James. Looking at the dark object that separated Noreen and James the sheriff smirked.

“I’m just taken my employers house workers home on this fine night sir.”

“Oh, are you now? Then where’s ya hat?”

“It’s right here.”

“Aye! Now did I tell you to move those damn hands from that wheel?”

“No, Sir.”

The piercing blue eyes drew closer to the inside of the truck. His smell began to clog the air with a stench of prunes and day-old cut grass.

“Now tell me this now, can you read or you only got “ya sir and no sir” in ya vocabaler?”

Looking into the sheriff’s eyes Uncle James cleared his throat and straightened his back, tightening his grip on the steering wheel. Noreen’s eyes never shifted from her target. Starring him down with a trembling and furious quake on the edge of her bottom lip. Her skin began to scream as her eye brows grew tired from her sheer focus. She knew he could feel it. She knew Uncle James could feel it.

“Breath,” her mom whispered.

“Boy what did that sign say a couple miles back?”

“It says Whites only. In the city Limits. After Dark.”

“Now according to my watch, you got eight minutes to get you and these fine ladies to the next town. Now today I’m in a good mood so I’ll give you until 6:01 to make it a cross that line.”

“Ye---”

“5:54!”

“Pop,” went the discharged hand gun from his hoister. It all flashed like lightening. The reflex of his hands, to his hoister, to the air. It was all a part of him. In one sweeping motion before the second shot could fire in the air Uncle James shifted the truck into gear. The buck of the truck pushed Noreen’s shoulders forward as everyone used both hands to keep their bodies from projecting forward. It took the truck three minutes to reach 50 miles per hour.

“Hurry Uncle James, “Noreen shouted.

Noreen’s mom and Mary Ann closed their eyes. Noreen’s Mom gripped her daughters shoulder and Noreen began to feel her breath once again touching the back of her hands. She looked out the rear to see the calmness of the sheriff’s body leaning on his automobile with a grim grin cracking. Protruding from his face. A sickening sight. The thrilling spectacle. The adrenaline rush of the game. The smile faded as the dust began to separate them. Uncle James frantically blew his horn to get the attention of Dewyte as he sped past him. He simply hand signaled him to follow at his pace. It was like they anticipated all that was happening and had the plan already laid out. Dewyte tailed the blue Chevy as if he was being pulled by a tow truck. Both Noreen

and Uncle James looked at their watches. It read 5:58. The trucks engine raved like a Kentucky derby horse using everything it had to reach the gate.

5:59 read Uncle James watch as the red and blue lights greeted the darkness.

It began to fade. Just as much as it greeted it faded in thin air.

6:00.

The truck began to slow down as it came to a four way stop. Coming upon the right was a big white sign about 6 feet wide and 7 feet long painted "Welcome to Marybone" in black lettering.

Uncle James barely stopped before drifting the truck to the right and driving an extra mile before getting to the official entrance of Marybone.

Noreen could hear the panting of Uncle James and Mary Ann. She looked back at her mom to see her eyes closed, breathing big controlled breaths. Uncle James looked back to see Dewyte driving slowly behind them. Both the truck and Dewyte's automobile stopped in front of the entrance.

"Everybody alright back there," uncle James asked.

"Lord Jesus James," Mary Ann said softly.

The driver's side door swung open as Dewyte smacked James shoulder and then placed his hand on his neck. Uncle James body loosened as he melted into the comfort of his brother. The gesture brought him out of his state of shock. Noreen opened her door and rushed to open the door of her mom's. Before she could go in her direction, her Mom greeted her with a strong firm hug. Noreen's head weighed down her Mom's shoulder as she started breathing heavily.

"Breath Baby, breath."

Mary Ann looked back onto the dusty road with a slight fear that the sheriff would change his mind and find a reason to cross into the boundaries of Marybone or even follow them all the way back to Bakerton. The road was as lonely and dark as it was the moment they reached the four ways stop. The stars began to burn a little brighter every minute they stood outside, offering an additional amount of light to the bright head lights of their automobiles. The shock of the previous scene made room for the silence amongst the group and a certain affection toward the night sky. A moment to breathe again was all their bodies begged for, a moment to appreciate the simplicity of nature. Anger and confusion were feelings that had been buried into the depths of the older adults because there was no longer room for it, the will to survive was greater. Their black bodies had already been marked over and over again by the rules of the land. They were marked by years and years of experiences like these. Noreen had always known of the dangers that lurked in that world, but it was different for her to be right on the edge of it. Standing with minutes away from the abyss was more than her eighteen-year-old body could stand in that moment. Noreen wept on her Mom's shoulder.

"Gather ya self-baby," she said.

Mary Ann rubbed her hand up and down the spine of Noreen's back. One by one they all began to name the age in which it first happened to them.

"I was 14," said uncle James.

"I was just 13 child, said Mary Ann.

"I was 15," said Dewyte.

Noreen's mom took her fingers and raised Noreen's chin. She took her thumb and wiped the last tear from her eye. Her Mom looked into Noreen's eyes until she was able to find her own strength.

"I was just your age."

Noreen's mom had to trust that her daughter would be ready. The realities that are often revealed at too early of an age began to set Noreen's expectations for things to come. The Entrance into Marybone invited James and Dewyte into its rocky country road where they decided to stay for the night until morning. They just couldn't see themselves making it back that late. The plan for them was to make their way back to Simpsonville once the sun had risen the next morning. They would stay the night at Dewyte's store where he had a room with a cot and plenty of blankets.

"We gonna just make our way to Bakerton," Noreen said.

"You gonna drive Docter," Uncle James asked?

"Yea I got it Uncle James," Noreen said with a smile.

"James and Dewyte you know there is nothing we can do to repay y'all but know y'all always have a place to stay and eat in Bakerton. Thank y'all for everything tonight."

"No worries, yall are family to us. We gotta look out for one another."

"Yall know yall got a place with me too," Mary Ann added.

They all hugged each other one after another with a tighter embrace than when they had first met one another at the graduation party.

"Make sure yall come by the store in Marybone. Anything you need is on the house ladies, Dewyte said with an affirming nod."

“By yall!” The all said simultaneously.

Noreen pressed her hands together with her fingers interlocking. Her elbows rested on her ribs as she slightly nodded and pointed her interlocked fingers toward James and Dewyte. A humbling bow that said more to them than any words could gather to say. She was indebted to their heroism on this night. Independence aside she was grateful to have made it out of that situation. James and Dewyte humbled by the request to make sure they landed home safely knew these ladies' situation, with Noreen's Dad gone so many days out of the year and Mary Ann widowed they knew that they took care of one another, took care of themselves. This night was a bit of a different situation. Dewyte and James saw themselves as an extra precaution for the ladies' travels, especially with the experience of Dewytes commute in and out of those towns. The men knew how much they all needed one another even if that need was not pressing in the moment. One day Noreen was going to do some special things and all of them needed to protect that. But that was only one example of the mutual value that they saw in one another, the small acts mattered and it established a familial bond that could never be broken.

Mary Ann was the first to open the car door as the other ladies followed her movement. The local news still faintly humming out of the truck radio and the engine still on, Noreen closed her eyes for a second. She put her seat belt on while watching Dewyte and James get in their automobile. They blew their horns at one another and Dewyte signaled for them to start driving. There was comfort for the men to see the ladies off first just in case anything else happened they could respond. Noreen looked at her mom and Mary Ann. Then she looked out of her rear-view mirror to see Dewyte and James slowly taking off into the town of Marybone. The window was down on Mary Ann and Noreen's side of the car letting in the cold air that

brushed against their foreheads swaying their bangs back and forth. The drive from the entrance of Marybone to Bakerton felt like a quick drive compared to the beginning of the trip. The sooner they drove off the sooner it felt like they got home. The white house with the all familiar porch and the uniquely steep drive way greeted them with peace and comfort after the long day. Noreen could not wait to take a bath, brush her teeth and crawl in bed. That is all she could think about.

“You need me to stay for a little while?” Mary Ann asked Noreen’s mom.

“Thank you, Ann, but we all need to rest. It’s been a long day.”

“Well I’ll be over in the morning to see you off Noreen. Yall sleep well.”

“Ok we’ll see you in the morning Mary Ann,” said Noreen.

“Bye Ann I’ll have some breakfast and some coffee going for when you get here.”

“Ok love yall.”

“Love ya,” they both said.

Mary Ann opened her door and walked up the driveway. You could see the tired in her bones as she walked, a slow and steady glide. Noreen and her mom waited at the entrance of the driveway to make room for her to get out and warn her of any incoming drivers coming down the main road. Mary Ann started her engine and slowly drove out of the driveway, blew her horn as she passed the truck and drove home. Noreen drove up into the driveway and parked underneath the old tree that hovered like a street light protecting and watching over that blue Chevy truck. Noreen opened the driver’s side door, stretched and tried to shake off the trauma that followed such a beautiful day.

“Mama. What a day.”

"I know baby. We survived it. It's what we do, survive."

"Yea Mama, we did. I bet you Daddy worried sick about us."

"What time is it Baby?"

"It's a quarter till 8 Ma."

"Ya daddy should be calling us in a few. Let's get in this house. Don't worry him about what happened today, just let me talk to him."

"Ok. Mama that's fine with me."

Noreen unlocked the side porch that served as the backdoor to the house. The white chipped paint door that made a sound like a witch's crackle slammed on Noreen's backside after opening it, cushioning her from the annoying slap that always startled them.

"Ya Daddy need to fix that door when he gets back here."

"I can fix it before I leave mama."

"Nah, uh un. You tryna do too much before you leave."

"All you need to be worrying about is getting on that bus in the morning."

"You know I can do it Mama."

"I won't here none of that. I'll leave it for ya Daddy. You help take care of everything around here already."

"Ma---"

"Nope."

"Ok," Noreen said as she giggled.

Noreen's Mom walked in ahead of her and washed her hands in the kitchen sink. She took the kitchen towel and dried them. Noreen walked passed her Mom and briefly placed her hands on

her shoulder to signal that she was going upstairs to her room. Noreen walked passed her Mom and Dad's room on her left. She walked into the living room looking out the big window overseeing the porch, the night sky blossomed inside the living room. She placed her hand on the wooden staircase rail that lead her up to her room and the bathroom. Noreen slowly walked up the stairs, as her left foot touched the middle step the phone startled her as it rang.

"Ring, Ring."

"Ring. Ring."

She ran back down the steps to pick up the phone out of years of habit.

"I got it baby!"

Her mom's yell didn't keep her from making her full sprint to the phone, but it did remind her of the conversation that had not too long ago. Noreen had spent the rest of her energy for the night running after the phone so she thought she at least better say "Hey" to her Dad.

"Heeeyy."

Noreen's Mom placed her palm on the bottom end of the phone so that her husband couldn't hear her talking to Noreen.

"I got it."

"I just wanna say Hi Mama."

"You gonna see him tomorrow."

"Mama let me say hi. I'll be fine."

Noreen's mom worried so much about Noreen living the incident out so soon that she had forgotten that her and her dad didn't get to talk about her graduation.

"Ok, Noreen wanna talk to you."

“Thanks Mama. Hey daddy how you?”

“I’m great. Congratulations my Suzy Q. How was ya graduation today?”

“It was amazing daddy. It was definitely one to remember.”

Noreen and her dad talked about the graduation and Claudia’s graduation party, leaving the conversation around the incident to sit where it needed to until the right time arose or she just couldn’t hold it anymore. Eventually at least telling her perspective if her mom was going to talk to him about it tonight.

“I’ll see you tomorrow Suzy Q.”

“Alright Daddy. Love ya, bye.”

“Love ya too Suzy.”

Noreen gave her mom the phone as the pit of her stomach began to ache from the conversation with her dad. Although they didn’t speak of the incident, it replayed in her mind. She took a deep breath trying to blow it all out of her system, for now. She walked upstairs into the bathroom to turn on the water for her bath. The cold water made her body flinch as it brushed the skin of her hand. She left her hand underneath until the water warmed. Noreen used the bathroom plug to keep the water from going down the drain. Noreen then walked to her room to gather her night gown and towel, her room was as neat as the dress she wore for her graduation. Her bags were all packed neatly in the left corner of her room, right underneath her bedroom window. She looked at her bed with the overwhelming feelings of all that was happening around her. This would be her last night in that bed. She went over to it and stroked the blanket that her mom had sewn for her for the first day of eighth grade, the year she decided she wanted to continue her education and go to the Lincoln Institute. She needed to

have something that reminded her of home so she decided that she would pack it with her in the morning. She sat on the bed listening to the water run in the bathroom. The sounds of the low stream waterfall echoed in her room as she got up and hurried over to the window to open it. It usually got stuffy at night so she wanted to cool out her room while she was in the bathtub. She sat back down on her bed and the Kentucky air filled the room. She breathed in the smell, closed her eyes and blew out the air. It smelled of the field and the animals, horses, pigs and tobacco crops. Accompanying the outside smell was a smell on the inside of the house that never caught Noreen's attention until tonight. It was the smell of damp wood and coffee. The smells settled her and became the undeniable smell of home, of the place she could always come back to, the place that would always welcome her with open arms. She found comfort in that. The thought of her bathtub overflowing suddenly flashed in her mind as she skipped back into reality and ran over to check. The water was at the perfect height and felt mildly hot to the touch. She walked back to the room to grab her towel and the rest of her essentials for the bathroom. She sat on the lid of the toilet to take off her shoes and socks. Noreen then stood up unbuttoned her dress and allowed it to slide down to her ankles. She covered herself as if someone was looking and dipped one toe in the tub. After feeling the warmth of the water, it signaled her body to take the full plunge. A baptism of the body, cleansing it for its new form. Away with the old to begin with the new. Noreen closed her eyes as she laid in the tub and began to hold her breath. She took one big breath and submerged her head into the water and she stayed under for as long as she could. As quickly as she plunged herself she rose from out of the water. She wiped the water off of her face and looked around the bathroom. The mirror was foggy from the warm temperature of the tub and hanging right next to it was an all-white

towel ring with gold tips that matched the bathtub knobs. The bathroom felt new, like Noreen was looking over it with new eyes. This had been her childhood home but much of her adolescent growth had been held in the dormitories of the Institute. A place she now oddly missed. This feeling of missing out on the memories of this house, past and future placed a heavy sense of sadness onto her chest caving deeply into her back. From the white tile floors to the teal bath tub, her eyes glanced back and forth, now holding both simultaneously in her eyes the simplicity of the designs put her in a trance. Doubts of her decision crept into her mind as she thought about her mom. But the energy of Mary Ann swept it away. Noreen stared at the ceiling, her thoughts were all consuming as her eyes never lost focus of both the tile and the tub.

This has been my life for so many years. Eighteen long years, Kentucky has been my home. The city is going to be so different from this place. Kentucky is going to be different when I come back to visit. Different as it may be this life isn't going to wait for me. It doesn't often wait for nobody. When you a woman, you educated and you a negro it makes it all the more harder than its supposed to be. There isn't anything here for me. I've known that ever since I can remember. Ever since I made that decision to get myself educated. Ever since that trial, I knew there was more out there for me. My ma sees it in her own way, daddy see it in his own way. I have to see it out for myself. If I don't that drifting feeling is gonna haunt me forever until I go mad. That drifting you feel when you know you fading away from purpose and what's inside you, until you become just anotha hand to those people. Then you just stuck, stuck like flies in honey, asking questions of ya self that can never be answered in this place. Even if I can't

find a way, I'm gonna find away. Knowing what I know about myself I can't humble myself like ma and breath my way through it. Kentucky is made only for them white folks cause they made it that way. It will always be that way. I know further North I can have some glimpse of a chance, even if it's not everything I hope it will be. It will be my chance.

Noreen closed her eyes as she soaked in the tub until her fingertips begin to wrinkle up like prunes and the water began to cool. Her body suspected it was about that time to get out before reminding her that the water was its cleanest thirty minutes prior. She sat up and held on to both sides of the tub to lift herself up. Noreen dressed herself and brushed her teeth before laying her body on the bed. She turned off the lights in the hallway before making her way downstairs to kiss her mom goodnight. The steps creaked as she gently walked down the steps. She knocked on her mom's door just to the right of the kitchen. The door was a quarter of the way open and accompanying the darkness was a small bright lamp that lit up her mom's side of the bed. She was knitting. It was her way of relaxing before going to bed.

"Goodnight Ma."

"Goodnight baby. I'll see you in the morning bright and early so we can get you on that hound."

"I'll be up and ready to go Ma."

Noreen kissed her on the forehead. Her mom placed her hand on her daughter's face comforting both herself and Noreen. Noreen embraced her mom's hand like a child nuzzling against its mother's chest. Noreen could see in her mom's eyes that she wanted to say more, something that would last for Noreen, at least until she saw her again. There was no point in

having that conversation tonight, but oh how she wished the silence of the eyes and the heart could speak.

The next morning the strong smell of coffee and eggs woke Noreen up from her sleep. The heavy smog pushed up against her window as the sunrise seeped through the openings of the thick clouds. The mornings in her bedroom never stopped surprising her, the beauty and the simple life of the country. Noreen forced herself out of bed as her feet touched the cold wood floor. She knew her mom would be up to her room any minute to wake her, she wanted to greet her this morning instead. Noreen walked to the bathroom to wash her face, she looked in the mirror as the water was running. Her face was tired. Her body was tired. All those feelings placed an extra weight on her shoulders. The feelings that felt like they were too much in the moment, but the pressure was normal for Noreen. In perspective Noreen was the trailblazer of her family. She was the first to finish high school. Now she would be the first to finish college and possibly beyond. Education was the most powerful commodity. It bared a type of prestige that separated you from most in the community. Where she came from most Blacks were illiterate because of the rare opportunities for education. Noreen was the lucky one. Her mom taught her to read as soon as she could. She had taught her all she knew even though her education didn't exceed past the fifth or sixth grade. In the town Noreen's mom was from, a white itinerate teacher would come to the local school and teach the kids who were willing and whose family saw value in it, basic counting and reading skills. Noreen's mom's first encounter with a book struck her like a Kentucky winter. It was a worn black King James Bible that hid amongst the other bibles and torn book covers that rested on a wooden shelf, located in a small farm house where six to seven young Negro children would show up five days

out of the week to learn. She wanted to explore the book in its entirety and learn how to read on her own. It was like a light was drawing her in feeding into her natural curiosity through the printed words. She became so fascinated with it that one day during a break from one of the lessons she took it while no one was looking. She ran and hid it near a tree close to the barn so that she could grab it on her way home. That day she sprinted home faster than she had ever ran before, beating the rain before it could touch the ground. She has kept that Bible ever since. Every time Noreen would kiss her mom goodnight she would see it right next to her, on her nightstand. Not so much for reading anymore, but as a connection to her own freedom, the freedom that she wished for her own daughter.

Noreen walked down the stairs toward the kitchen and saw a beautiful breakfast that was spread out on the table as though a couple more guest was coming to join. At the head of the table was her mom sipping coffee and reading the local newspaper, while Mary Ann was finding things to do around the kitchen until it was time to eat.

“Ma how long were ya’ll up for?” You made all this food for me?”

“We gotta send you off good and full baby.”

“You know I’m always up early and I couldn’t have done all of this without Mary Ann.”

“Oh, my goodness, how we gonna eat all of this.”

“We gonna take care of it, don’t you worry about a thing. Just make sure you get ya fill,”

Mary Ann said.

“Get you a plate cause we just finished frying your eggs.”

Noreen grabbed her plate and watched her mom slide the sunny yellow yolks on to her plate with little effort.

“Grab ya plate Ann and fill it up while I make your eggs.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice girl!”

Noreen looked at the table a little overwhelmed by everything sitting in front of her. The black skillet filled with gravy and pieces of sausages filled to the brim. Golden biscuits that gave off a buttered aroma once you pulled it apart. The bacon in another black skillet that was strategically placed on top of a green oven mitt to protect the table from the heat, still sizzled as Noreen approached it with her fork. The homemade blackberry jam sat right next to the crisp bowl of fried potatoes, sprinkled with cooked onions and green peppers. Those potatoes were the families’ absolute favorite dish. It was one that her mom had perfected throughout the years. Noreen and Mary Ann sat down at the same time with their eyes a little bigger than their plates. Noreen knew that it would be a while before she had this type of meal again, so she ate like it was her last meal, smiling from cheek to cheek.

“Ma and Mary Ann! This is amazing!”

“Hahaha, enjoy baby girl.”

“Ya mama put her foot in those potatoes huh.”

“These are the best you have ever made ma, and you know ya potatoes are good.”

“Mary Ann gave me her green peppers and onions from her garden, so I guess that’s the trick.”

“Yea, ya’ll put ya foot in there.”

“We fixed you a plate to go so you won’t get hungry on the Greyhound and Mary Ann even fried you up some chicken so you can eat with those biscuits that’s not smothered in all that gravy. Everything’s in that fridge, so don’t let us forget it.”

“Thank you, Ma and Mary Ann!”

“It’s my pleasure child, we gotta make sure ya trip is a good one. We can’t have you starving.

Noreen didn’t leave one bite unattended as she let out a big sigh while slightly rocking back in her seat.

“Ma, I gotta go wash up before we head out. It’s almost a quarter till eight and I wanna leave here by eight so I’ll have plenty of time to spare before catching the 8:30.”

“That’s fine by me baby.”

Noreen’s feet didn’t touch the floor as she made her way back up to her room. She touched every wall upstairs with a certain affection of love that spoke to the memories of the house, the memories of her family. She sat on her bed one last time. After enough time had passed she slowly grabbed her bag and closed her room window.

Before closing the door to the house, she kissed her hand and placed it on the inside door frame. Her mom and Mary Ann took her suitcases and her basket of food and put them in the back seat of the truck. The rain began to fall as they drove into town, a short ten-minute drive from their Bakerton home. The truck stopped across the road from the bus stop. Noreen’s mom put the truck in park and left the engine on. They waited until the Greyhound’s breaks made that loud airy sound before opening the doors. The rain puddle directly underneath Noreen’s feet splashed as she stepped onto the road. Mary Ann and Noreen’s mom grabbed the bags from the back seat and walked Noreen to the luggage holder underneath the bus. There were two other riders in front of her, an older gentleman and a middle age women.

“Everybody alright on this fine day,” the bus driver said.

A simple nod was all everyone could respond with. It was an early morning and people just needed to get to their destinations. The driver took Noreen's suitcases and left her with her food basket to take onto the bus. He could tell from the slow movement that this would be the last time the mother and daughter would see each other for a long time.

"We got two minutes before we leave," he said with an understanding tone.

Mary Ann rubbed Noreen's back and gave her a big hug.

"We'll see you when you get back now, don't be no stranger."

Noreen squeezed Mary Ann's hand and Mary Ann began to head to the truck to give the two their time.

"Momma," Noreen said with a quivering voice.

"You're gonna..... you're gonna be just fine, Noreen's mom said as she tried to squeeze the sentence out.

Her mom's tears ran down her cheeks as she looked her daughter in her eyes.

"You go and be all that you are, no questions, no looking back. You hear me?"

"Yes Ma, I will."

"O....kay, her mom said with a deep breath. Ok."

Dreaming of the Great Migration





Cocoa Brown skin, with the smell of tea tree oiled hair. Dark brown hair coursed through the slight twist of her slender fingers. A smile that embraces the body close to hers but keeps you at a distance, simultaneously. Through her eyes you can see the many lives she has lived.



Sandy brown skin with short black hair. Hair as dark as the midnight tobacco fields in Kentucky. A small town, a small community, a field that survived many generations. The smell of tobacco fields follows her wherever she goes, where ever she lands. Education has taken her places she never could dream of. She needed more than Bakerton could give her. It reminds her of where she is from. It reveals her secret. She's not from the city.



Together they were. Together they are not. Together they raised seven. Together they created room for all of us. The first sight reveals nothing of the future. It reveals nothing of the generations after. A separate legacy, together.



The beauty in those eyes, the beauty in that smile. The embrace of love. Soft and innocent. We can only guess what you will become to all of us. Our hope is never in vain. The first girl out of all of those boys. My mother was proud. She smiled and said “You are my first granddaughter.”



Her curious eyes were wrapped in a past that didn't allow me to exist, but created a space for me to exist. The beauty that would have been, if I could only ask you the question, "Who are we?" Those answers awakening like an untapped spring, possibly revealing to me the points of our departure. The space between the diaspora and the migration. The space between sleep walking and awakening.

Poetics

My thesis *Dreaming of the Great Migration* is a hybrid of literary fiction, poetry, images and familial interviews that intersects and fills the space in between my families' migration story and the imaginative and creative characters of *North*. The novel *North* is a projected literary novel that I hope to complete in my continuous exploration of fiction writing. This literary novel will explore the lives of two African American women during the second wave of The Great Migration. The protagonists that drive the novel are uprooted from the old country, like millions of other African Americans between the years of 1949-1970. These two young women, one from a working-class family and the other from a family of sharecroppers, arrive to the Midwest through a multilayer of forces. The forces being that of the Jim Crow South and the undeniable impetus of destiny's call. The invisible and the visible living in dichotomy. The city of Indianapolis, IN avails the disturbing realities of relocation as Black women in America. North, as they call it, is the communal identity of the separation between the union and the confederate states, or the so called promised land. Their journey will take more resilience and navigation than they both assumed. Thus, leading these two characters to form an unlikely bond. Through their friendship they face the turbulence of what it means to be a displaced citizen of one's own country. Together they attempt to attune to the question many others have tried to answer upon their arrival- what does it mean to survive? As the novel continues to explore the internal conflict of the meaning of 'home', these characters respond to the haunting migration call that takes them away from comfort and familiarity.

The premise of this novel has probed me throughout my two years of Graduate school. It has kept me up at night, it has gently tugged me into rabbit holes of research, it has left me paralyzed and overwhelmed with information that at times exacerbated my fear of mishandling the honor of my family's legacy. In the midst of the overwhelming feelings there was a whisper that stopped me in my place and centered me toward the action that made most sense. The whisper simply said, "Start." This whisper echoed and was reinforced by my living family, my loved ones that had passed, my ancestors, my instructors, my friends and more specifically my mentor. This word meant to me that I had to write and allow the story, the characters to take me into the depths of their lives and invite me to find a little bit more about myself in the process. While I have listened to the stories of these characters through the novel writing process my thesis has morphed and shifted to a point where I not only invite the foundation of a future novel but the presence of my family who has inspired these stories. This is captured through pictures, interviews, memories, newspaper articles and hybrid creative work that forms my thesis. In one way or the other this project has placed on it, the hands of the many people that form my imaginings of my families' journey through the difficult historical point of America, the Great Migration.

The story of the Great Migration is the history of America from 1915-1975. This history echo's the stories of millions of African Americans who left the South and everything they knew to move to the Northern states. African Americans left in droves to flee violence, death, poverty, and devastating work and life conditions. They fled to pursue freedom that did not exist in Jim Crow South. My family was a part of that wave of migrants, more specifically my grandmothers. They left their home in hopes of something greater, in hopes of something

greater than what the South had given them. They moved to the Midwest to find education, better jobs and a place so their children could step into their purpose. The stories I heard growing up fascinated and inspired me. But it wasn't until I grew older and wiser when I began to realize that this great history is in my own body, it is my inheritance.

It is an inheritance that follows me and shapes my existence. It wasn't until I embarked on this creative work that I was able to name what has been right in front of me this whole time, that I am walking in my Grandparents footsteps. I am a piece of the hope that they had when they departed from their families in the South to the possibilities of a new horizon in the Midwest. I have taken that same courage from them and made my home in the Northwest for the hope of possibility, the hope to be everything that I am supposed to be. My Black body is learning to fully expand my wingspan because of their sacrifices. I am learning to fully expand even in these moments, when history continues to show its self in my present reality. When Black men and Black women are still being murdered by police, when access to education, housing, food, healthcare and other resources are governmentally not a primary concern when it comes to the livelihood of the people of color in this country. I hold in the balance fear and hope every time I walk outside my home, every time I sit down in front of my computer. The Great Migration is not a distant thought it is very present and very real. We as people are still moving and shifting to find the Promised Land.

My Poetics shifts between honoring the matriarchs of my family and memory. The entirety of my life I have been surrounded by powerful women, who have raised me and have taken on very important roles in my life. Their presents and sacrifice in my life has been important to my survival in this country as a Black man. The lessons that they have taught me

has changed how I think about the world, the stories they told has given me insight to who I am and who I can become and most importantly the physical, mental and emotional toil it took for them to provide for me is something I celebrate and overflows my ideas of creative story telling. This does not take away from the impact of my father and the men in my family who have also shaped me but it speaks to the ever-flowing presence of those matriarchs and the realization of their power in a country that doesn't recognize their strength. It humbles me to discover through storytelling, reflection, literature and oral family history that I would not have, cannot presently experience freedom if it wasn't for these women giving their heart, soul, mind and body to their hopes, making room for me to be a piece of their hope. This creative process, my poetics has allowed me to reflect on the difficult choices that were made in order to give me and my siblings opportunities to not only live, but to thrive. These difficult choices such as my grandmother's choices to flee the South gave me access to explore the psyche of those decisions and create a new creative landscape through my writing that I hope will draw me one step closer to those answers.

It is through memory that the sacrifices are never forgotten. It is through storytelling that the memories and essence of the matriarchs in my family flow through many generations. As Black people our history has been pillaged, forgotten and erased. I am learning that through the power of creatively sharing those memories that I am a conduit of my familial and ancestral legacy.

There have been numerous novels, non-fiction works, interviews, speeches throughout the creative process that has projected me forward to understand the time period, get more familiar with the dialogue and the context of the landscape and people that have been

bestowed on me to write about. Before launching into my creative project, it was the work of Isabel Wilkerson, James McBride, James Baldwin and Toni Morrison that opened my eyes to my reality and connected the pieces of my life to the American story of the Great Migration. Their work grounded me and gave me permission to pursue such a difficult endeavor. The novels that allowed me to fill in the spaces throughout my writing and to plant myself further into the characters I was creating.

The novels that impacted my creative process are *Cane River* published in 2005 by Lalita Tademy and *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* published in 1982 by Ernest J. Gaines are two novels fascinatingly based in Louisiana. These novels trace the life and generations of two strong African American female characters through the backdrop of slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction and more specifically the present day of Miss Jane Pittman. Which the narrators label her as a woman who lived through a whole century of the continued development of America and its past and present racial divide.

The author of *Cane River*, Lalita Tademy brilliantly told a narrative with many protagonists. The story begins its focus with a strong matriarch who births a generation of strong female African American characters who slowly uses their innate abilities to slowly carve out a speckle of a life worth living given the horrors of American Slavery. These women suffer through generations of sexual abuse, inhumane conditions, fear, beatings, heartbreak and internalized racism, still clinging on to hope. As each generation of women in this family reach toward an understanding of who they are, I believe is one step toward a type of freedom. In many cases not a literal freedom until they witness the signing of the Emancipation proclamation but a freedom that lays in the love of family and community no matter the

circumstances that made them family. The author focuses directly on the generation of women placing the male characters as minor characters. As I observe the African American male characters in the story. They are considered to be important to the sustaining of the family, the protectors of the protagonist (women) and the core of the family. Sadly, they are never given much time to develop because as we know they die prematurely or they are sold off to another plantation. The survivors are the sons of the family or the great grandsons who are born in the midst of or after the significant changes have happened in America (abolition of slavery, some land ownership) but they still play minor characters allowing the reader to place all of their focus on the development of these amazing women.

The white male characters, primarily the fathers of the children, play a more significant role of course because of the caste system/slavery but get a glimpse into their internal struggle, whether that be society not allowing them to be with a black woman or dealing with the guilt of the pain that they have placed on these black women. I noticed that the story is carried by the many details that the writer displays about the land, the time period, the sodalities of the protagonists and the unique speech of the characters. It transports you and allows you to distinguish characters through the vivid details, letter writing, unique gifts the characters have or way of moving in the world. These types of details catch my attention and these are skills I hope to utilize in my own work. The generation of women that take over as the protagonist in the story as the women pass into the next life is a spin to the fiction work. I believe it is hard enough to focus on the development of one character throughout a story but to have another character seamlessly take the place of another protagonist is impressive.

Which leads me to the character development of just one protagonist in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. The difference between the two novels is just that, singular focus versus a multigenerational, multi character narrative. I can't say out of which I prefer but both I believe were masterfully done. I received more out of the character of Miss Jane Pittman because it felt like I journeyed with her and the multiple characters in *Cane River* gave me a more objective view. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* made me feel as a reader connected to my own family. It made me recall the hesitancy of my grandmother when I began to probe about her life in the 'Old Country'. The language, sassiness, grave details and the things that were happening around that character continued to remind me of my grandmother's history. The narrator wasn't only able to conjure the details of a life but she gave me a world perspective, going from internal to external at each turn. It took me from a bird's eye view to the depths of the protagonist soul. It let us in to her hurts, her defenses and most of all her ability to survive. What impressed me so much while reading was the factual information and details of the time period and the character that lead me into believing at times I was reading a memoir. It blurs autobiographical, memoir and fiction perfectly together. In this novel, the dialogue between characters I believe far outweighed that of *Cane River*, which for me as a reader allowed me to submerge even deeper into the protagonist.

The novels made me realize how far I had come and how far I was from creating the work that I hoped to create while entering into University of Washington Bothell's Creative Writing & Poetics graduate program. I didn't know what to expect the second year of my MFA program. I was full of hopes, aspirations and many questions about writing. The many questions I still have about writing. I had received the mentor that I knew would understand my writing

and open up experiences for me that I would have never been able to open on my own. Yes, very high expectations. I was convinced that I could accomplish so much in nine months. Then an email sprang into my account with a message reading “There is a wonderful opportunity that I want you to be a part of for the next four months. I am a part of a book club with this amazing lecturer by the name of Christopher Frizzelle and we want to give you a scholarship for the book we are reading, *Beloved*.”

I had just started working at the book store a couple of months before I started my last year of Graduate school and the works of Toni Morrison drew me in like gnats to a patio light. I had just about read all the synopsis of all her greatest works. Every time I passed her shelf she called for my attention. I knew where she was meticulously placed better than my own home address. She called out to me. She somehow knew of the journey that I was about to partake in, the discovery of the matriarchs of my family. She knew that my heart’s desire was to bring homage to their stories of migration. A task I didn’t take lightly. A task that could possibly take a lifetime to achieve or a lifetime wrapped in years of work writing the novel. The email sent was a living, breathing manifestation that the stars were aligning in my direction. That I would have everything I needed for the journey ahead.

Beloved, over the course of the four months of my scholarship was a hard, rich, breathtaking work of literature. I am not sure if I would have been able to absorb so much, if it wasn’t for the many things I read about Toni Morrison, if it wasn’t for the documentary that I often watch for inspiration and most importantly the book club community. There were many things that I wouldn’t have understood or brushed over if it wasn’t for Chris’s lectures and the geographical diversity, experiential diversity and intellectual diversity that circulated amongst

the many participants of the book club. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* showed the magnificence of Morrison's intellect and the depth of it. Literature and film layered with meaning that is never necessarily revealed but contemplated over for a long time is my favorite kind of art. It doesn't have to necessarily lead to answers but the way the writer makes you think about scenes or sentences for days upon days is the magical essence in reading brilliant literature.

This was a story inspired by previous works of Morrison such as the *Black Book* and a playwright titled *Dreaming Emmet*. What I believe Morrison captured in this work of art is a play on dimensions or layers of time where you have death, the dead child is resurrected, the child is no longer a child and the child seeks answers from the present life of the family, more specifically from the child's Mom. The Mom, who has done this heinous act of killing the child. But the questions haunt you throughout the writing such as,

“Was this act heinous at all?”

“As a mother or parent, what would you have done?”.

“ Do you choose a life of slavery for your child or freedom by death?”

Questions such as these seem only to scratch the surface of the writing, given the horrific circumstances that the characters minds, bodies and souls faced during slavery. The context of the writing is placed in the middle to late 19th century in the haunted house of 124, in the free state of Ohio which still looms with domestic terrorism. House 124 is the home of her Mother in Law, Baby Sugg. The characters believe the house is haunted by Sethe's baby. The characters that play major roles in the writing are Sethe, Baby Sugg the Mother in Law, Denver Sethe's daughter and Paul D the partner that joins the family after the Mother in Law passes away and

the sons leave the home. One of the most mysterious and important characters is Beloved the visitor from the river.

Toni Morrison continues to keep the reader engaged through the suspense of who this odd character is and we as readers come to find out later that this very person is Sethe's daughter who she killed, the baby that the family believed was haunting home 124. Toni Morrison captures the movement, the psyche and the interior life of these characters to seamlessly move the story along and teaches readers the art of close reading. Every word, sentence is precisely woven together so closely that a word cannot be removed without the whole sentence falling apart and that reveals a writer who has obtained prose mastery. The rewriting and research that I assume gave birth to this work leaves me speechless, I catch myself constantly asking "how does she do this?". The character development brings the reader into the trauma of these meticulously crafted characters. I felt the moments in my bones knowing that the stories that I read are not that far removed from my own families' story. The feeling is closer than it has ever been now that I am discovering my family's history. What Morrison's work has taught me is that this work deserves slow, meticulous detail that will only come to you in time. It will come to you when it is ready and the only thing you have to do is stay diligent in the work of writing. There are so many more details and layers that can be explored. Characters are like hundred-year-old wines that bring out the most satisfying taste in time. Prose are not just words that help explore a main idea they are orchestrated one on top of the other like notes of a great symphony; because each word is the main idea, that allows the reader to feel, to understand and to see the world through a different pair of eyes. I have to remind myself to stay constant, stay ready. I have everything I need.

The reminder and encouragement I received from *Beloved* was a piece of literature that allowed me to open my eyes and partake in work that was drastically different than literary fiction. It led me to the experimental novel, *Cane* published in 1923 by Jean Toomer. A hybrid of prose, poetry and vignettes that blend dialogue and slight character development. The book *Cane* does not need a specific genre of writing to connect the reader with the essence of the narrative. It explores the lives of these African American people through the different genres, giving me the understanding that there are many different ways to tell a narrative that I have yet to explore. The writing style brings a certain uniqueness to each story and a different expression. As a reader, it took me awhile to settle into each individual narrative right away because I was still trying to grasp the previous. The narratives distinguished themselves but I couldn't fight the feeling of wanting to understand more about these individuals and their lives. The feeling of wanting more could very well be what the writer had in mind for its reader, if so it was done successfully. I enjoy writing that doesn't reveal everything, writing that allows you to think differently. So even though I craved more there was a satisfaction as far as how well the writing was done. I would go far as to say I found a happy medium, an appreciation of the writing while also wanting more of it.

The characters of *Cane* give me the reader the different geographical landscapes in the United States coupled with the experiences of these people in the North and South. The writer presented experiences of working in the field and the migration up North which captured city life compared to the 'old country' as James Baldwin would put it. Through the hybrid work along with research and oral family history I continued to learn that it was assumed that life would be drastically different going from the North to the South, but migrating came with its

own tragedy's. The North may have presented itself one way but it wasn't always as it seemed. The writing not only explores the migration story but topics such as death, love, nature, masculinity, aspirations, and religion just to name the few topics that this hybrid work represents. These topics are explored through the stories and perspectives of black men and women making the work richer.

My thesis has not only been inspired by fiction literature but poetry as well. *Jimmy's Blues* is an accumulation of James Baldwin's poetry that is written in an array of forms that cuts, brings to light, faces a mirror toward and echoes truth throughout its pages. This raw form of his writing resembles thoughts, memories and documentation of what it means to walk and be aware of the body while here on earth. The layers underneath his writing represents what it means to be black, what it means to be poor, what it means to be a male, what it means to be a foreigner and an 'other' in your own country. In his 'otherness' he needed to find safety in the expression of his art, in his identity as a gay black man, eventually leading to his transition to France, a place that would be his home until his transition from this earth. You can see these truths in the subtleties of his words and the glimpses of his transition from one language to another. The life he has lived translates to his typewriter whether it be through his novels, essays or poetry. As Nikki Finney states in her introduction "Baldwin was never afraid to say it. He made me less afraid to say it too." As I hear and continue to read his work my fear dissipates, my confidence rises as I write my truth in the face of a country who never had my freedom in mind.

The poems of Baldwin and his speeches directly connect me to the pieces of his genius, his struggles and a more holistic view of his personhood. His poetry helps me to understand the

importance of the continuous grind of writing and working on your craft. My understanding is that Baldwin has always called himself a poet throughout his career, even though his poetry is not what he is known most for. Poetry served as a conduit to his longer form. It allowed him to play with rhyme, pace, language and explore ideas that would eventually, somehow end up in his prose. In some of his poems I could see him playing with the perspective of language. An example of that perspective is shown through this passage.

“I wonder how they think
the niggers made, make it,
how come the niggers are still here.
But, then, again, I don't think they dare
To think of that: no:
I'm fairly certain they don't think of that at all.”

The raw language initially brings an uncomfortable feeling to the reader. In my opinion, this is done on purpose. He raises a question that places a mirror on whomever is most fitting. He rhetorically ponders over a statement that would be most commonly talked about in the privacy of the community that this horrific word has been associated with. There is a deepened understanding of this word by Baldwin that allows him to play with the perspective. He understands the history behind the word. Baldwin separates himself from the word, separating all of our people from that word and leaves those whose values partake with this word to drown in their own ignorance and self-destruction. The deeper message that reveals itself to me is that this self-destruction can come from ignorance or apathy towards justice, most commonly both.

James Baldwin often referred to his typewriter as his torturer and his greatest weapon. It makes me reflect on the development of my own work. The process I have been through

unpacking the history of my family, the scenes that have my bones aching long after the work is complete. I keep going back to it even through the torturous moments. I come back because I need to come back. How much more do I need to give? How can I push the boundaries? How can I give more of myself to my writing? These are the questions I still ask myself. These are the questions Baldwin pushes me to ask of myself.

When I wasn't reading the act of listening guided me into a deeper rhythm of writing. I listened to lectures by *James Baldwin and The Love Craft Country Album* which is an HBO series based off the book *Love Craft Country* by Seattle local Matt Ruff. The book and show is based in 1950's Chicago, blending the genres of Science fiction and Horror with four lead African American protagonist. This story delightfully has the scenes and environment that I am interested in and presently studying. The music that compliments the scenes of *Love Craft Country* has allowed me to step directly into the character I have created, Noreen. Her life taking place in 1949 Jim Crow Kentucky. It has been a meditative, visceral and haunting process of creating these new scenes that lead the reader from a graduation celebration with family connections and friends to a brief encounter in a Sundown town. This time of listening and meditating on these scenes has been as important as the material I have been reading last quarter and what I am beginning to read this quarter. It has allowed me to breathe a little more life into the characters, sitting with questions such as, who are they? How will they react presently given certain circumstance and how will this shape the future of the character? I have been searching around every corner for inspiration and the act of listening has set my inspirations in motion.

The two songs that have inspired the created scenes have been *River* by Leon Bridges and *I put a spell on you* by Alice Smith a remastered and soulful version of the original song. The song *River* connects me to this deep longing that is so familiar. The southern voice of Leon Bridges draws the listener to a fusion of Memphis Blues and Southern Gospel. The chorus matches the roots of the voice seamlessly,

“Take me to ya River, I want to go. Take me to ya River I want to know.” It speaks to the struggle of longing for rest from the weariness. The struggle to live on in this life when this life is so unforgiving. It reminds me of the gospels of my people, the gospels and struggles for freedom. This song speaks to me not so much of a physical rest but a spiritual rest. “Been traveling these wide roads for so long, my hearts been far from you. Ten thousand miles gone,” is the opening line that connects me to my personal journey. It reminds me of the sacrifices I made to be here, away from family, experiences, the family members and friends that I have lost in the midst of my own migration story. These lyrics allow me to connect to my own weariness of the migration journey, it connects me with the weariness of my people, my family and these unforgettable characters that I am able to create.

The song *I put a spell on you* remastered by Alice Smith has a haunting sound that slows my surroundings and allows me to see the image of pain, fear, heartbreak and disappointment in the faces of the created characters. Her voice is filled with the same heartbreak and pain filling the lyrics with the longing of a lover whom she cannot have. Her voice haunts me well after listening to it, that is the essence I am moving toward in the development of the Sundown town scene. I want the reader to be haunted by American History as I am haunted, as my ancestors and family were haunted by it.

James Baldwin has greatly influenced my life and my work. It was “The Fire Next Time” that brought me closer to myself and gave me new language for the history of pain, new language for my purpose and Identity. An artist born in Harlem at the beginning of the Great Migration and living through the Civil Rights movement, through his words he masterfully sets me in these time periods. Through his eyes as a Black male artist. His words continue to speak to me and has allowed me to carve out room for myself in this vast world of writing. The time that I have had to meditate on his lecture about “the purpose of an artist” has allowed me to make sense of why “the artist” dedicate themselves to “art”. This life can be simultaneous to the life of a martyr. An act of sacrificing yourself for the sack of others, for the sake of a cause. In regards to the artist’s work they sacrifice for the sake of truth. Artist have a responsibility to tell the truth about what it means to feel and survive this very difficult life. Most artist are in constant discovery of their truth. They are simply bathing in their curiosities but are always in the act of asking and seeking. I believe my Poetics has had to find comfort in the purpose of allowing my curiosity to roam and find my truth. Throughout this program I have discovered a small portion of that through the unveiling of my families’ stories. Stories that have inspired me to create a world of fiction that I hope will create a ripple effect of encouragement to other artist who seek truth. Stories that I hope will bring pride to my family.

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