

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

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Collection of Poems

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Abstract

This is a collection of poems by Maya James which capture the sociohistorical experiences and stories of women within her life.

Keywords: Mama, sissy; Queenie; First crush; Grabbed; Alter call

Maya James, a night writing child of the moon who resides in Brooklyn, has been getting in trouble for telling stories since 1987. She grew up surrounded by old women and their stories. Ever since she was a little girl, old they would sidle up beside her smelling like hard work and peppermints, needing to unload their troubles, prayers, and blessings on an unbiased ear. This inspired that little bookish girl to pursue the writer's life. A multimedia writer, she loves to blur the lines between genres; between the seen and unseen in order to capture the black surrealism of her world. That Carolina, that Baltimore, that Diaspora, that great south to north migration magic.

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Mama, sissy

June 19th, 1915

Dear Sissy,

Granddaddy knew he was gonna die today. He made me take out his Union jacket from that old sea chest we pushed in the corner last time you was home. Remember Sissy? Mama wanted us to put it with the rest of the ghosts. After surviving Reconstruction and Redemption the blue of it was still strong. In his voice scratchy as old guitar strings he said, "Little gal, the history in this coat the only heirloom I got to pass on to you." Then he ain't say nothing else for a long while. We just sat on the porch and watched the road; let the sweet water swelter in his chipped glass as each point of moisture marked the hours; looking for death to come calling. He lifted up the right sleeve that had strings falling from it bout as long as the lines of ash forming on my face from swallowing bitter parsley pain. And you know how much I hate parsley. "Yo grandmamma bit the ends off of this here arm so she could sew butterfly stitches in my head from shrapnel that tried to take it. Each piece of iron she took out with her teeth from my brow and spit out in the bucket at her swollen feet sounded like money falling. She say 'think of it as the shillings we got to pay for our children and theirs to love strong and free.'" Then he looked at me as his lips reached to meet his ears in jubilee and resignation. "Little gal, the stock you come from got blood red as jasper and spine just as hard. We died so slave wouldn't be your surname, now it is your job to keep it that way. Now you put this jacket on and repeat what I just said."

And I did.

Then he was gone.

Come home,

Lil' Sis

Queenie

September 12, 1945

Dear Mama Sissy,

She's here and Lord knows I'm tired. It's taking everything in me not to let this floor be my cooling board, but I had to write you first. These women up here don't know nothing about birthing babies Big Mama. Somebody needs to sit down with Mr. Hopkins and set him straight. They had me and, I reckon, about ten other colored women laid up next to each other like we was sows. The doctors was walking in and out the ward smoking cigarettes like it was proper. They tried giving us some hoodoo they called "twilight sleep" but I was having no parts of that. I ain't wanna wake up with my head on backwards and my child took away from me. They was talking to me like I ain't know my body; like my grandmamma weren't the best midwife on both sides of the Black River. Weren't no circle of women to help me stand on the bricks when my time come to push; they ain't give me a bowl of pot liquor to soothe my insides. Only powdery fingers was reaching toward me, so I had to put my foot down. Call me crazy but I ain't want that to be the first picture of the world my baby would see. White hands ready to snatch her from home. So I screamed loud and long Big Mama. Them white faces just stared back at me with surprised Os where they mouths should be. They was looking at me like I was wild but I ain't care cause I felt free. I reached down and remembered everything you taught me. Whispered all the songs we sang in the birthing room back home and closed my eyes so I could conjure your face next to mines. I pushed and made a bowl of my palms for my child to slide into. Held my hand out and the nurse was so stunned she just gave me the scissors so I could detach her from my womb myself. But she is here, beautiful with all of your stories and eyes set in her little face. Her name is Harriet; I pray she name her first girl Araminta after the first mother of our line. Now I'm tired,

See you soon,

Queenie

March 29, 1985

Hey Mama Queenie,

I love it up here in New York! But I do wish you would answer the phone when I call, I promise the devil ain't gonna steal your soul through the phone. I know you trying to teach me patience with all this letter writing but I don't have time for that. I am ok; sometimes I feel like this place is trying to spit me out like watermelon seeds. Yellow taxis look like boats zooming down the asphalt river running through the city. I just gotta jump out the way or catch the current. But I'm surviving; trying to swallow the devil before he gets to me. Oh! I just got cast as an understudy for Dreamgirls! It's only a matter of time before my name is lit up in Broadway lights! Although I may have to change it, what do you think of Miracle? My name is nice but it may be too long for the marquee. Or maybe I could use your name, so it will continue on. Either way I will keep working on it. I didn't tell you before but thank you for making me sing on the choir. You were right, they ain't got no God or no Old Bay up here but those old songs of Zion swaddle me. I couldn't appreciate it then because all I wanted to do was play. But look at me now! Who knew singing "His Eye Is On the Sparrow" would take me to Broadway?!! I sang it in my audition just like you said to do. The man started crying when I was done and said he hadn't heard that song sung like that since he left the south. Said I brought all his sharecropping relations in the room on the sugar of my voice. He asked who taught me that song, and I told him all about you. How I have a praying grandmother, the beautiful Queenie and how your voice got even more honey in it than mine. Then he tried to get fresh. Tried to put his hands where they don't belong. So I had to pull out the pearl handled knife out of my bra, the one you gave me right before I got on the train. I smiled real sweet and said my Queenie taught me that too. Then he gave me the part! I won't never question you again,

I'll be home directly,

Araminta

Grabbed

Grab her by the ...
was the directive spewed
from the sphincter like
orifice
known for defecating hate
with abandon

A rally cry for patriarchy
to go marauding
the fleshy pulp of our
bodies

Bodies temptingly vulnerable
like a lone
Persimmon dangling
off a branch in Gaza

As if patriarchy
hasn't picked
enough of our fruit

We get up in arms
about relegating women
to binders in 2012
But in 2016 we roll
over
Let silence part our legs
Look left to a wall
spray painted with stars and bars
while sphincter face acts
as sadistic speculum
mining our vulvas
for diamonds and secrets
and all the things that make us
magic

Grab her by the ...
Is the first war

this new president
has waged

I want to cry

But then I see Harriet
her hands
dusty black
like turned soil
Soot under her fingernails
from the fires that burned
at Combahee Ferry
Throat raspy from singing
come by here
as she trafficked
Jubilee

She reaches across time
Across the filmy surface
that separates the living from the dead

Her touch is cool
as she places my hand in that of
my great grandmother
who survived under presidents
who owned her
and still birthed children
who created the Blues
and movements
in the face of stagnation

While I mourn for a country
who has always had its hand
Up my skirt
she shows me another great mother
One who washed small pox
out of blankets in a river
while standing on a flat rock
and she still was able to give
birth to daughters who

will one day stand
on that same rock
protecting the water
with prayer, arrows, and sage

Then more women
gathered around me
Women who were unbossed and unbothered
Women who burned themselves alive
in the name of justice
Women who used their inner muscles
to push
the hands that tried to grab them
out of their wombs

There eyes urging me
to remember

So the next time
Sphincter face
wants to send his
minions marching
on my person

I won't cry

I will burn

Altar Call

The altars in Catholic school never called me
I'd sit in the cavernous cathedral
choking on incense
bobbing up and down
in rituals that did nothing
Effigies in alabaster
Staring down on me
in disapproval of the pagans
who stomp unhindered in my blood
We'd get a little closer
on Sunday mornings
as I watched my grandmothers
flail and scream under the spell cast
by sopranos and drums
I'd pray God would touch me like that
Yearn for that mandated ecstasy
But still, I wasn't moved
So I went in search of God in my image
and found her within
She was a big bodied mermaid
Dark and luminescent
Deep and shallow
Salt water and sweet
I craft living altars
That honor the black magic in me
Driftwood instead of mahogany
Burn sage and sweetgrass
Seven day candles strobe my prayers
in prismatic glory
Make offerings of watermelons and honey
Communion of hoecakes and moonshine
Mark the sign of Mami Wata
with firmas
using my menstrual blood
Sing hymns of Nina
Read scripture from the book of Ntozake
When I want to see God
I pick up a mirror

reflect her light
make a perfume of her love
and adorn mys