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Folklore: Rescuing Black America From Its Erroneous And Stereotypical Depictions In Literature

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FOLKLORE: RESCUING BLACK AMERICA FROM ITS ERRONEOUS AND
STEREOTYPICAL DEPICTIONS IN LITERATURE

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2020

Dedication

I dedicate this work to the people who enriched my life with stories and everyone who pushed me to tell my own.

FOLKLORE: RESCUING BLACK AMERICA FROM ITS ERRONEOUS AND
STEREOTYPICAL DEPICTIONS IN LITERATURE

by

SAMANTHA SHIELDS, B.S.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

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Preface

Mario Vargas Llosa said to the young novelist, "in every fiction, even the most freely imagined, it is possible to uncover a starting point, a secret node viscerally linked to the experiences of the writer" (15). Alas, this work is no different. I went to elementary and middle school in Sugar Land, Texas in the 1980s. Black history was then and even now something you had to learn on your own. My family was insistent that I learned where we came from. I remember vividly sitting in the bed with my Pa Pa reading to him from our Empak "Black History" Publication series. I was a voracious reader even then and my mother always bought me books. Virginia Hamilton's *The People Could Fly* had the most impact on me. Even now, I often give my friends' children the same book. There was something about the stories, the musicality of the speech, the bold expression of life in the illustrations, the morals and witty lessons that stuck with me more than other books. The book not only engaged me, but it lit a fire in me. It made me want to keep reading, keep searching, keep learning all I could about my history.

Decades later in *Advanced Fiction*, we discussed authentic voice after reading Percival Everett's *Erasure*. I remember I was completely taken aback because a non-black student told me that she did not understand my criticism of Bigger Thomas and thought he was an authentic black character. At the same time, I realized that my black students did not know or comprehend our history fully. What was more troubling to me was how uninterested they and their parents seemed about learning it. It occurred to me that this was what I needed to focus on, changing the perception and giving the next generation of young black people engaging stories to explore our culture through.

It is evident to me that the literary community has quite a bit of onus in convincing people that the stereotypes assigned to Black Americans are accurate portrayals. Everett's novel

further elucidated the problem for me, "The fear of course is that in denying or refusing complicity in the marginalization of 'black' writers, I ended up on the very distant and very 'other' side of a line that is imaginary at best. I didn't write as an act of testimony or social indignation (though all writing in some way is just that) and I did not write out of a so-called family tradition of oral storytelling. I never tried to set anybody free, never tried to paint the next real and true picture of the life of my people, never had any people whose picture I knew well enough to paint." (212) His words inspired the premise of my thesis because it brings to light some important questions: What happens to a people's story when the understanding of their past, as well as their cultural foundation, is erased? How should writers ensure that stereotypical depictions do not overshadow the authenticity of the Black American narrative? How can writers present an authentic voice in Black American stories? What can be done to make sure that Black American voices are not marginalized in the literary community? This work is my answer to those questions. It is my assertion that using folklore to tell our oft-ignored history will not only give society better literary depictions of the Black American Community but will simultaneously chip away at the erroneous depictions that deprive black people their humanity in the eyes of others and negatively impacts their perceptions of self.

To establish what qualifies as a Black American story, one needs to look to the past. Looking to the past, however, creates some complication as "[r]evisionist historians such as Howard Zinn and James Loewen have argued...American history texts have been whitewashed so thoroughly that they don't count as history anymore. They represent determined forgetting—an erasure of what is shameful from our national memory banks so that history can function as a unifying, patriotic myth" (Jonathan Gottschall 124). The foundational truths of the Black American story are missing because the Black Community's tether to it was maliciously and

systematically severed. The means by which those stories would have passed from generation to generation were deliberately impeded. Unfortunately, because of slavery, the deliberate erasing of records that would help identify the origins of persons brought to this country, the selling/separating of parents from children, and Jim Crow laws that prevented blacks from reading, writing, or congregating, vast portions of our story remain missing.

Some of the folklore we have today do provide quality and authenticity to the Black American story, but for the most part, they all end after the abolishment of slavery. That is an immense amount of story, experience, and wisdom that is not being passed down to young Black Americans. Imagine having your history, your contribution to society being bookmarked from when you arrived on the continent until Reconstruction. This work will explore Black American experiences from the 1950s to the present. Many significant events in the Black American story have long been ignored, such as but not limited to, the Haitian Refugee Crisis, the murder of James Byrd Jr., and the bombing of Jack Caesar's home. While these stories will be rooted in historical fact, they will be works of fiction. As Llosa said, the novelist, "...[is] encouraged and nourished from the depths of his being by those ghosts (or demons) who've made us novelists determined protesters and reconstructors of life in the stories we tell" (22).

As a reconstruction, this work uses ethnographies, interviews, and other firsthand accounts from Black Americans to produce not only better-quality stories but a positive portrayal for society and the Black community to ennoble. Those firsthand accounts of Black American stories are the foundation for the new folklore created in this thesis. There are valuable historical and life lessons taught in these stories. This work offers new mythologies, new legends in the hopes that they uplift as well as inform young children and even some adults. There is a duality in good writing: there is truth in fiction and fiction in every truth. We have seen these types of

concepts repeatedly done in literary compositions. Especially, in books that are representative of culture, works such as *Warrior Woman* by Maxine Hong Kingston, *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood En La Frontera* by Norma E. Cantú and the most famous of these, *Roots* by Alex Haley have been pivotal in changing narratives. According to [Emma] Pérez, there is little space for...the oppositional voices of women of color...in narratives of US history that privilege linear trajectories of east-west migration, militaristic models of male heroism, and Anglo-American models of progress and development. Disrupting these narratives is far more than just an archival project. It requires radical reconceptualizations of time and space in the United States that proceed from the knowledge and experiences of the marginalized. (Michael Cucher 98)

This is my attempt at taking some ownership of that reconceptualization, unlike Everett's protagonist, Monk, and try to set somebody free, try to paint a true picture of my people. This work contains stories that speak to Black America's identities, not as Africans or slaves, or just in the limited historical scope given to them by a society influenced by white supremacy. John Gardner, the author who wrote the novel *Grendel* (a rewriting of the Old English myth, *Beowulf* from the perspective of the monster), said, "Real art creates myths a society can live by instead of die by" (qtd. Gottshall 27). The goal of this work is to change the perspective as well as the representation of a marginalized community such as the Black American community. It may be naïve and grandiose to think that these stories can do anything to help the Black American Community even to live, but nevertheless, it is my sincerest hope that they help it to thrive.

How this work intends to accomplish this goal is through folklore. But why folklore? According to the *Continuum Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, "Whether ballad or legend, fairy tale or folktale, myth or tall tale, epic or fable, folklore gives us an understanding of our place in the world" (Donarita Vocca 293). If folklore gives people this understanding, then it is

the perfect medium to incorporate Black America's place in society. Gottschall explains, "Through stories we learn about human culture and psychology, without the potentially staggering costs of having to gain this experience firsthand. Or maybe story is a form of social glue that brings people together around common values" (28). Obviously, these stories are of tremendous importance to identity, the establishment of social norms and how we navigate human interactions. So, why are we not utilizing them more? Is it because Black America's cultural identity is so obscured and patchworked together that we cannot understand the value? Is that lacking specific knowledge of who our ancestors are, and the means to identify them make us less appreciative? Do we reject the culture we have here because it was the one thrust upon us? I am starting to believe that is the case, but I am inclined to agree with Zora Neal Hurston. In a letter to Frank Boas, she explained the motivation and urgency behind her anthropological and cultural study, "It is fortunate that this is being collected now, the negro is [having his]...Negroness...rubbed off by close contact with white culture". I, too, believe despite the constant calls to fully integrate, the culture blacks have created in America is worth preserving.

The Black American Community would benefit significantly from the re-establishing of this type of traditional storytelling. It is unfortunate that not only have we lost so much of our story, but problematic ones have been assigned to us. James Baldwin explains it this way, "it is a peculiar triumph of society and its loss that it is able to convince those people to whom it has given inferior status of the reality of this decree; it has force and the weapons to translate its dictum into fact, so that the allegedly inferior are actually made so, insofar as the societal realities are concerned" (20). There is something to be said about the impact that folklore has on society. Folklore transcends cultures, ages, languages, and geography. Many people know the stories of John Henry, Arabian Nights, Tikki Tikki Tembo, and more. These stories have reach,

and they have the power to create a world that is hopeful and full of promise. This kind of thing has been done before, other collections of folklore were written to preserve or establish a written account of Black American stories; most notable is Zora Neal Hurston's *Mules and Men*.

Virginia Hamilton, awarded children's author, also explored Black American Folklore, "I ask myself, to what degree is this an American book? A black book? I've been attempting for many years to find a certain form and content to express black literature as American literature and perpetuate a pedigree of American black literature for the young." (qtd. Wendy Smith 1).

All persons deserve honest representation through stories. It is time that the literary community produced and marketed authentic stories of marginalized communities. Not doing this accomplishes two things: silences authentic voices in the literary world and allows audiences to stay comfortable by not challenging their perceptions. Literature is supposed to challenge us. It is supposed to expand or make flexible our boxes; it is supposed to shatter our preconceived notions. It is a failure on the part of literature when "its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real which cannot be transcended" (Baldwin 23). Fiction, despite its definition, offers truths to the world around us. People are more accepting of stories than they are facts. If the stories that are told are not an authentic representation of a people, then what purpose does the writing and publishing those stories serve. Certainly not a literary purpose; at that point, they have become propaganda. It is the goal of this work to create folklore that is accessible to children and people of other cultures to foster some more positive images of Black Americans in the mind of readers.

The way this work endeavors to change people's perspective is by utilizing the medium of folklore to address the experiences of real black people. To do this, I had to fully understand the people I was basing my stories on and then write stories that were true to them/the event.

This was not an easy task for several reasons. I was listening to hours upon hours of firsthand accounts from the family members of James Byrd Jr., the interviews of the Jewish/white people who were very upset that black people were moving to Third Ward, the interview of the people who were at GITMO, the survivors of the shooting at Emanuel AME, hearing black women tell their stories about navigating the workplace...it all took a toll. I had to be hyper-vigilant not to let the emotions I was feeling bleed into the stories. I became extremely conscientious about tone. The point of this work is not to create anger, or to stoke resentment, this is not even a referendum on white supremacy; I just wanted to write stories that will help young kids understand the beauty and depth of the Black American experience.

Another reason I had some trouble was that some of the issues I wanted to write about, for example, HIV and AIDs were hard to find ethnographies for. This was due to the fact there are privacy laws, there was and still is a stigma about those diseases and unfortunately most of those who contracted it in the 80s and 90s did not survive. This was the same issue I found with locating interviews about the crack epidemic and the impact the War on Drugs had on children. I ended up scrapping the AIDs story, and instead of trying to find ethnographies from children, I found some with parents who lost their children because of their addiction. I thought about interviewing people myself, but I was worried about the time it would take as well as the additional ethical forms and paperwork that would be required. I ended up settling with oral histories from people serving basic minimum sentences, parents who lost custody of their children and other recovering addicts who either lived through that epidemic or later cases that were similar.

When I finally reached a point in my research that I felt gave me a solid foundation on which to build this folklore on, I took some time to consider how I would write them. I

consumed a great deal of folklore, not only black folklore but folklore from other places around the world. I reread myths and fables to try to pick up some sense of structure that I felt would work for these new pieces I was about to endeavor to write. This proved difficult because the very function of these works is to reflect the cultures they originated from. So, while the readings put me in a creative frame of mind, I could not utilize their structures because they did not speak to the people I was representing.

This notion of representation was something that was weighing on me because all of the black folklore I read had a dialect that I was not sure I could employ. I did not want to be a part of supporting a stereotype that black folk cannot speak the king's English. Or enforce the notion that we are less educated than others in our society. However, both Virginia Hamilton and Zora Neal Hurston employ dialect in their stories. They did it to reign true of the regions they were writing about and to explain the influence of African dialects, Gullah in particular, had on our speech/vocabulary. I wrestled with it for a while, but after listening to Hurston's *Mules and Men* and *Every Tongue Got to Confess* being read by the spellbinding Ruby Dee, I understood the effect. Not only is the dialect reflective of the culture in terms of our history but also how we interact with each other when others are not listening. There is also in these stories a type of soul, jazz, gospel rhythm that rings truer by employing this dialect.

What I tried to do to fight the possibility of the dialect being misinterpreted as evidence that Black Americans are unlearned was to show my main characters, the Breedlove and Justé family code-switching. I wanted to show how this family as educated, savvy businesspeople, homeowners, pillars of their communities but still have a realness about them. This family not only narrates and manages the pace of the story, but they illustrate a healthy family dynamic, the importance of family storytelling, present and active fathers, educated mothers, and more. This

family is very much like my own in that way. I grew up in a household where every adult around me had gone to college, I am a third-generation college graduate. My grandparents went to college in the 1940s and 50s. Education was important in my family, but there is a duality to Black America: what is presented to the corporate or academic world and what is presented to your family, friends, and neighbors. This duality is a part of the Black American experience, and I would have been remiss if I tried to remove it. It would have been faux authenticity.

The final problem I had to overcome was taking these difficult and dark topics and writing about them in a way that was accessible for children. I wrote each story in a way that highlights the importance of the storyteller. So, depending on who is reading or telling emphasis can be changed to make aspects more or less important. I also wanted each story to spark conversation with parents and children. This was particularly hard for me to do after researching James Byrd Jr.'s murder. Even though I was alive and knew about the crime when it happened, I was not aware of (or maybe I had pushed it out of my mind) the depths of his killers' depravity. How do I speak to children or ask families to discuss such ugliness? I knew it needed to be discussed because, however, many people would like to shield their children, there is a point when you are endangering them. There is also the fact that Black American's do not have that luxury to shield their children from the realities of society. Fortunately, I was reading *Brer Rabbit* at the time. Those stories communicated hard truths to children by utilizing animals in their world to teach lessons. I decided to do the same.

I referenced the works of Zora Neal Hurston, Virginia Hamilton, and Percival Everette earlier as critical influences when creating this work. It is true that a great deal of what I have done is reflective of the works I read from them; however, unlike Hamilton and Hurston, these folktales are not collected; they were created. Hurston and Hamilton were on a sociological and

anthropological expedition. Whereas what we have here is something that is blending of several genres or genre nonconforming. Norma Cantú's creation of fictional autobioethnography, *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood En La Frontera*, and Gloria E. Anzaldúa's *Autohistoria*, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, helped me to open up my mind to break the rules of genre and format. This work, while reflective of all these writers, is what I would call a collection of ethnographic folktales. As each of these pieces start from the firsthand account of members of our cultural and are filtered into manageable stories that are to be told orally and passed down from generation to generation to provide a cultural understanding of a people.

I spent a considerable amount of time combing through databases, libraries, cultural centers, interviews, and any other firsthand accounts I could find of some events that I believed either critical for young people to understand or were stories that are often excluded from the discussion altogether. The stories I present in this work are inspired by actual events/experiences. The foundation of folklore is familial: whether it is someone's kin or shared cultural experiences or even the greater human experience. Folklores tend to demonstrate how we are similar to one another. My other stories talk about the shared experiences of my black brothers and sisters. It is my hope that not only do these stories instill some sense of pride in them but give a greater understanding of the Black community to our brothers and sisters of all colors and creeds.

Through most of these stories, I utilize choruses or refrains. My motivation for adding this was to, for example, remind the reader how far Little Brother was on his quest, but also, I used them to make the stories easier to remember for promoting the traditional way folklore is shared. Some of the stories turned out longer than is usually sustainable for human memory, but when equipped with songs, the storyteller can remember the essential information and effectively and individually make each story their own. Even though I have written these stories, I believe

these works to be a culturally cumulative performative piece that is in alignment with the original frame and purpose of folklore. I stress the importance of oral tradition by the use of the Breedlove and Bien-Aime characters as they tell stories to each other and the actual folklore themselves.

Besides music, there is a recurring theme of religion/ faith, God, and the Devil. Religion is a significant component of the Black American life. Whether they are believers or not, historically, religion explains a lot of the experiences black people have had in this country. The church is pivotal in helping black people gain the right to vote, civil rights, and is a place where most of our cultural norms were established. To dismiss the role that religion has on the black community is not possible because religion is inextricably intertwined within our cultural foundations.

Black history, as I mentioned earlier, is not something that is often discussed in our school textbooks. For the most part, the discussions of black history usually center on before and after slavery as well as the Civil Rights Movement. It is incredible that when the topic of Black history comes up, whether in schools or from our leaders, the same names tend to be the only ones who get mentioned. While the contributions of Martin Luther King Jr., Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks and George Washington Carver are important, there are a plethora of other influential Black Americans that were not only credits to their race but the entire country. It is a fact of life that history is "written by the victors," but if we think about it, looking solely through one historical perspective limits the understanding of our country and impedes the progress society can make. When deciding which topics to cover in this thesis, I initially said the 70s to present. I changed it to the 1950s because I had to discuss the story of Jack Caesar's home. It was a prime example of history that was never told to me despite me growing up in the

neighborhood where the bombing happened. I had intended to include Rodney King, but as I was researching it, Botham Jean and Atatiana Jefferson had been killed in their homes by police. It seems odd and entirely horrendous to say, but Rodney King's beating seemed inconsequential and small in comparison.

The historical/societal context in each of these stories is not something that I assume the average person would automatically know. "The Devil's Masquerade" is similar to what we know as a creation folktale. Creation folktales seek to explain the ways of the world by incorporating deities. Often in Black American folklore, we see these tales, especially when it comes to the Devil. Satan gets a lot of blame in these types of tales and this is no different in that way. This folktale seeks to explain the foolishness behind racism. As the commandment says, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." The apparent culprit would have to be the Devil. This is not intended to excuse human behavior but to illustrate how ridiculous and un-Christian racism is.

"Shadow Of Doubt: Favored by God and the Devil" is a legend that addresses white flight. I was born and raised in the city of Houston, Texas; more precisely, in Third Ward. Third Ward is the hometown of Phylicia Rashad and Debbie Allen. It houses both University of Houston and Texas Southern University where Michael Strahan proudly graduated from. Also, where renowned artist John T. Biggers became the founding chairman of the art department at the university when it was then known as the Texas State University for Negroes. Third Ward is now and has been a predominantly black neighborhood for the past fifty to sixty years. Prior to that, Third Ward was a Jewish community. Until it was not. It started with one savvy black rancher who decided he and his family deserved better, Jack Caesar started the change in the tides. I had never heard of Jack Caesar before this project, but I did know this place that I called home did not always welcome black people. All of Third Ward's rich history from Jack Yates

High School, to Barbara Jordan, Mickey Leland, Frenchy's Chicken, Beyoncé, Solange, Wheeler Street Baptist Church, Row House Project, Sugar Hill Records (the oldest recording studio in the United States), The Shape Center and Emancipation Park. Jack Caesar was the first.

Nevertheless, very few know him or talk about him.

"The Sister Plait" is a folktale discussing the 1980s crack epidemic. During that time the Black American Communities were being terrorized by a hydra. The multiheaded beast of the crack epidemic. Black communities were facing the problem of addiction, crime, over-policing, unequal and disproportionate sentences, separation of families, political demonization, lack of federal, medical, psychological and financial support. Whole communities were devastated not only by the crack epidemic but also the policies lawmakers put in place to address it. The War on Drugs and War on Crime have lasting imprints on the lives of Black Americans even decades later. The effects of the crack epidemic and War on Drugs are still present today.

"Little Brother and the Conch Snail's Quest" addresses the Haitian internment at Guantanamo. In 1991, President Aristide was ousted as president of Haiti by a coup. Most of his supporters, fearing reprisals, fled the island in small boats headed towards America. However, the Haitians were stopped in the Caribbean Sea by the United States Coast Guard and Navy. The people on the boats were taken to an American occupied island of Cuba, Guantanamo Bay. Some of the refugees seeking safety from the Haitian government were separated from their families and put into HIV and AIDs camps. This refugee crisis from Haiti was a blight on America's humanitarian aid reputation for decades to come.

"God, Time and the Little Queen of Vision Colony" is a familial myth. It is the only work in the project that has any personal connection to me. The reason why I incorporated this tale was because it reigns true to the original purpose of folktales. Familial folktales also speak to the

reason why I even attempted this project, which was to create discussions between generations of family members to create understanding about their family dynamics and the world around them in a way that's accessible and less traumatic. Discussing things such as dementia, Alzheimer's, or death with young children can be hard, but for centuries parents have been utilizing this traditional form of storytelling to help children navigate and process things that happen in life.

"Byrd in Flight" discusses the events of June 7, 1998; the day James Byrd Jr. was lynched in Jasper, Texas. Byrd was dragged for three miles on an asphalt road with his ankles shackled together and chained to the back of a pick-up truck. Mr. Byrd was conscious for most of the ordeal, which began when three white supremacists shanghaied him, taking him to a deserted road. There, the three men savagely beat him. Then, they proceeded to urinate and defecate on him before dragging him to the point where his head and arm were ripped from his body. After that, they took his mutilated remains and dumped them in front of the black cemetery in Jasper, Texas. The shocking depravity of the murder, reminiscent of the lynchings that stained the history of America from the late 1800s to the late 1960s, resulted in significant legal changes. The heinous nature of his death resulted in the 77th Texas legislature passing the James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Act in 2001. In 2009, the federal government expanded the 1969 federal hate crime bill with the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crime Prevention Act. It is commonly referred to as the first modern lynching in America.

The Black Church has been under attack since its inception. "The Legend of Parish Saint" talks about similar types of attacks that happened on April 4, 2019, when the last of three churches were burned down in St. Landry Parish, Louisiana. The role of the church changed from one of hegemony to one of economic, political and social empowerment. This change in dynamics created a visceral reaction in America's white supremacists, and as a result, a tradition

of attacking Black churches began and persists even today. The first noted attack was in 1822 as a response to a slave revolt allegedly led by Denmark Vesey, one of the founders of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The same church where nine parishioners were gunned down by a white supremacist that they welcomed into their Bible Study. Because of the church's role in the progress of the Black community, it will continue to be a favorite target of those who want to deny Black Americans an equal position in the country their ancestors helped to build.

Christianity was used as a weapon to convince enslaved people that they were to be docile and accepting of their fate. Even worse, slave owners wielded an edited version of the Bible commonly called the "Slave's Bible" to make blacks believe their enslavement was the will of God. Despite the use of faith-based subjugation, blacks held on firmly to their faith in a God and religion that played a role in their captivity. People who see themselves as lesser than tend to not fight a system created to keep them in that station. This explains the whitewashing of Jesus in artistic depictions. The systematic dehumanizing of black people had a lasting impact on their self-perceptions. Activist and former organizer of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Bernard Lafayette explains this dynamic as an impediment of the Civil Rights Movement in his interview for the White Lies podcast, "They used to tell me that if God wanted us to be equal with whites, he would have made us white. You had to have a great imagination that any change was going to happen in Selma, Ala[bama]." Think of the amount of manipulation it takes for a person to believe that all-powerful deity did not think them worthy of equal treatment. "Sistah Stitch Makes a Quilt for the Lord" challenges that vicious message of supremacy and declares that by God, we are all created equal. It also uses the idea of folk art to

communicate the words of The Lord as a reference of the women of Gee's Bend and the importance of quilting in Black American art and history.

"The Fog of Sapphire Lake" takes the stereotype of a Sapphire/angry black woman head-on. In discussion with the hosts of the 2 Dope Queens podcast, Michelle Obama succinctly explains the paradox of being a professional black woman, "[I]f you're a woman and you're too angry; people stop hearing the point. They don't hear you. And I'd love to be able to get in [and] change that, but the truth is that people will hear things differently from me. I will do one thing and somebody else will do the exact same thing, and it will be interpreted completely differently." This pervasive stereotype found its origins from the Amos n Andy minstrel show character Sapphire Stevens. Many black women in the workplace can give their own experiences of being dismissed and often silenced due to the often-perceived idea that they are always angry. The Sapphire trope stereotype provides an easy pretext for those who choose to invalidate the experience, knowledge, ethics and passions of black women. We have seen these stereotypes weaponized to attack women such as Serena Williams, Stacy Abrams, Maxine Waters, and, most recently, PBS' White House correspondent Yamiche Alcindor.

The Counterintelligence Program was operated by J. Edgar Hoover's Federal Bureau of Investigations from 1956-1971. COINTELPRO intended to disrupt, discredit, and defame "subversives." Some of the "subversives" that were targeted by the FBI and Hoover were Martin Luther King Jr., Fred Hampton, The Black Panthers, The Nation of Islam, and other anti-war, anti-establishment groups. The practices of the agency included sending spies, bad-jacketing, illegal or excessive force, harassment and even assassination. The program was exposed in 1971 by the Citizens' Commission to Investigate the FBI who stole and released files documenting the domestic espionage program. COINTELPRO was deemed illegal by congressional investigators,

but that did not stop these types of first amendment violations from continuing. Even today, activists are targeted and subjected to the same practices used on Civil Rights activists in the 60s. In 2017, the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI were forced to release damning reports showing they were targeting political activists and classifying them as terrorists under the label of Black Identity Extremists. The extent of the investigations is still unknown as most of the documents like the DHS Race Paper are heavily redacted. "Shootin' Stars" and "Lucky's Eyes and Ears" talk about the consequences and ramifications these policies had on Black Americans who sought to make the government live up to its promise and honor their inalienable rights afforded to them in the constitution.

Botham Jean was in his home on September 6, 2018 when Amber Guyger shot and killed him. The murder was just another in a long line of police shootings that had caught the attention of the groups like Black Lives Matter and the nation as a whole. The former officer was charged and sentenced in early October 2019. While much of the country was frustrated and perplexed by the light sentence given to the woman, Botham Jean's younger brother Brandt offered his brother's murderer forgiveness. The act was something that caused visceral reactions within the Black community and overwhelming praise from the white community. He was even awarded the 2019 Award for Ethical Courage from The Institute for Law Enforcement Administration which was accepted with reservations by the young man. Reservations that address the concerns of the black community of his offering forgiveness so quickly, that forgiveness is seen as an acceptance of what continues to happen to young black people in America at the hands of people who are supposed to protect them without bias. "Forgivin' and Forgettin'" is a tale about Black America's reaction to Judge Tammy Kemp and Brandt Jean's offering of forgiveness.

The structure of this work changed drastically. Initially, I was giving readers historical context before each story and the worked in isolation. However, one story I wrote as a Chinese Box, and that is where the Breedlove family originated. After getting some feedback from my adviser I decided the folklore should be within a greater story of one black family, living their lives and spending time together. Doing this helped create deeper relevance and connectivity to the stories than just a historical snippet. It was challenging finding scenarios where these stories would naturally come up in discussion. I wish I had the idea to do the story within a story before I wrote any of the folklore. I cannot know for sure at this point, but I suspect it would have been easier to write the larger story and then find the places where the smaller stories fit.

The folklore is in different forms. While much of my work reflects a style employed by Hurston and Hamilton. Some of my other stories mimic other forms of folklore such as myths and legends. The reason for the employing of different forms of folklore was to illustrate the different forms of the genre and to use the style that was most appropriate to the content of the tale. The Devil's Masquerade, The Fog of Sapphire Lake, and Shootin' Stars are all my take on myths. While Shadow Ofdoubt: Favored by God and the Devil, Little Brother and the Conch Snail's Quest, The Legend of Parish Saint and Sistah Stich Makes a Quilt for the Lord are written as modern legends. Finally, the fables in this work are Byrd in Flight, God, Time and the Little Queen of Vision Colony, Lucky's Eyes and Ears and Forgivin' and Forgettin'.

This work is by no means complete. I consider this a living, breathing and growing collection just like the people whose story it strives to tell. I hope it is continuously built upon as a record of the resilience, multidimensionality and beauty that resides within the Black American Community. I am not the definitive voice; these are not the definitive stories ...there's so much more to be discovered, to be explored, to be told. As writers, we are equally responsible for

ensuring that our work speaks to the truth of who we are and whom we represent. Writers have the power to change society, one word, one character, and one story at a time. Words can be weapons; words can be shields (no pun intended), words can be poison, words can be a healing balm, words can create division, or words can be bridges. Our narratives are our own, and we need to take control of them. We need to define ourselves, not only to our young people but to all of society.

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The Devil's Masquerade

Fitz sat on the porch chewing a grass stalk in the summer heat. His grandmother was shucking peas in her rocking chair and his grandfather was fiddling with some greasy piece from his old El Camino. His sister Naima and his little brother Vaughn played in the grass with their dog Scratch. Their parents worked in the city. During the week the children stayed with their grandparents while their parents lived in a small apartment trying to save enough money to buy a home of their own. One that could accommodate them as well as their children.

As the two younger siblings played games with each other and their excited pup, the sky opened up and a bright beam from the smiling sun above broke up the clouds. Vaughn, Naima and Scratch stopped and lifted their faces to the sudden embrace of warm light on a cool Spring day. A low rumble started and for a moment, Fitz thought it was his stomach. And the rain came. It fell in huge, unrelenting, drenching drops. When Naima and Vaughn made it back to the porch, they were soaking wet.

“Don’t you go tracking water in my clean house!” Granny raised her voice but nothing else about her changed. Not her face, not her hands shucking peas, not even the rhythm of her rock in her chair. The two younger children froze, immediately knowing the tone and the consequences of defying it. “Take them wet things off and hang ‘em on that there railing. Fitz go get them towels and dry things. Fitz, even though he was only 10 years old, moved like an old man, groaning as he got up just as his grandpappy and daddy did.

The boy brought the younger ones some clothes as the rain became more and more intense. “That fool of a dog liable to drown out there. Scratch, fool dog bring your behind on up here,” Pappy spoke quietly. But Scratch heard him well enough to stop his frolicking and run to

his side on his mat by the warm grill that had been smoking meat since the early hours of the day. He stretched, rolled and shook spraying the family with droplets of ice-cold water.

“Scratch!” Granny yelled and the dog dropped to his mat like a stone tossed in the lake.

“Looks like the Devil is beating his wife, again there Lou,” Pappy said to their grandmother.

“Wonder what she done now,” Granny and Pappy laughed. Vaughn wanting in on the joke said,

“What are ya’ll talkin’ ‘bout? Devil did what?”

“Pastor said, the Devil don’t have any power last Sunday, Pappy. Weren’t you listenin’?” Naima chimed in, laying her head in her big brother’s lap. Fitz rubbed her head. He liked the way his sister’s hair felt. He often volunteered to oil her scalp when Granny’s hands hurt from “Arthur”.

“That’s just what us old folks say when the suns out and it’s raining.” Naima sat up,

“Why?” Their grandparents looked confused and then looked at each other.

“You, know baby, I don’t know,” Granny said.

“Me either, sugar,” Pappy said wiping his hands on his old Dickey overalls.

“Does she beat him when it’s raining and cloudy?” They looked at the young, curious girl, then each other and laughed.

“You may be right, sugar, many times Granny has whooped on me.”

“You hush, Jacob! Don’t tell these children stories like that. They might go tell the neighbors. You gonna get me arrested behind your fibs.” His low chuckle made Vaughn smile big. He jumped in his Pappy’s lap.

“Tell us a story.”

“Boy, you don’t like my stories,” Pappy tickled the small boy. The boy pushed his grandfather’s hands away and hung across his lap, while looking at his grandmother upside down as she finished the last of the peas, “Granny tell us a story.”

“V, you see me getting ready to cook these peas, don’t you?” The boy made a sad face that turned to an upside-down smile and she lost all the sternness in her voice and body. “Alright, but don’t you start whining about being hungry, when dinner ain’t finished when’s it’s sposed to be.” The boy shook his head and sat up, attentive in his Grand Pappy’s lap. Fitz was quiet and moved with a cool nonchalant manner that indicated he was too old for these sorts of things. The other two buzzed and even Fitz, despite himself, could not hide the excitement from his face. For when granny told them stories the world, she created weaved around them like a knitted sweater, holding them tight, keeping them warm and soothing the bitter chill of a dark night in the country plains. Granny’s words moved off of her tongue like sweet cream butter and mesmerized them all in a spell with no discernable magic. Even Pappy could not resist.

She wiped her strong and yet delicate hands on the towel hanging on the armrest of her rocking chair. She stood and stretched while walking towards the Old Smokey to warm up a little. The rain was still pouring down in sheets of thick icy drops. She looked out into the bright storm and breathed in the grass, the mix of cold water from the sky meeting the heat of the sun baked earth. “You know there was another storm like this, but it went on for forty days...”

“Oooh and forty nights, you gonna tell us about Noah, Granny?” Naima asked.

“Sister Willis, talked us about Noah in Sunday school, told us about all the animals and the boat,” V chimed in.

“Ark,” Fitz said coolly.

“Ya’ll gonna let me tell it or not?” V covered his mouth with both his hands, “The Lord hadn’t had a good nap since the beginning. He had been very busy with Earth and His creations. Especially, people. God was feeling low because the people had become sinful, not at all how’d he wanted them to turn out. The Lord had just finished his fortieth day of rains. He had finally washed out the stain of sin from the whole Earth and now He was tired.”

The weary Lord was sitting with one of His angels looking down at the world he had started anew with the descendants of Noah and the animals on the ark.

“Those humans were sho nuff a mess before, Lord.”

“I know. I just don’t get why they carried on so? They sho like to make things harder on themselves.”

“Well, Lord, I couldn’t make no sense of it either while I was down there.”

“Maybe one day, I’ll go down there myself and live like them to get a better understanding.”

“Oh, Father no! Do You think that’s really necessary? Maybe send another human, a faithful one.” The Lord shrugged. “The humans before were such a mess but at least You had Noah.”

“Yes, thank Me, for Noah. Without Noah I woulda had to destroy everything. But I must say, all that rain took a lot outta me and I’m mighty tired.”

“I understand. Would you like me to look over Earth for you while you rest, Father?”

“Thank you, but you’re just a small angel and you cannot manage such a huge job. Go fetch my son, Lucifer, to watch over them.”

“Lucifer? But Lord...”

“Don’t you worry, Lucifer can’t stir up no trouble now that I destroyed all the sinful.”

Then the Lord went off to sleep.

Lucifer made his way to Heaven to cover for the Lord. He beat on the pearly gates. “Let me in, brothers! Father asked me to look over His children for Him!” The angels were skeptical, but they dared not question the wishes of the Lord. And so, they opened the gates.

Lucifer, being the Devil himself, made a fine mess of the place upon his arrival. He stomped around the golden streets with his big muddy boots. He was mucking up the glimmering clouds and stomping so hard that all the art and statues in Heaven fell or shifted from their mounts and foundations. Once that old Devil made his way to the throne, he sat in it messing up the Lord’s seat groove. The angels were too horrified at the mess Lucifer had done just in the few moments after his arrival. “Lucifer cut this mess out! The Lord isn’t going to like what you’ve done.”

“He won’t like that you let me do it either. Best you get to cleaning up.” The angels fearing the Lord’s wrath got busy. Meanwhile, that Devil, was watching the humans down below. “This is a much better view from down there.” The Devil looked down and saw that the people were working towards building a land where man could be equal. But that didn’t sit well with Lucifer, “That sounds like that could lead to a whole lotta peace and prosperity. And that sounds plenty boring to me. What can I do to liven things up down there?”

The Devil sat a spell and thought. He took a walk around Eden and plucked a few fruits of knowledge, took a bite and tossed them in the river. He pillaged all the mansions in the sky, filled his pipe with palms and wiped his smoke and sweat covered face with the white robes of the saints. Lucifer went through some of the Lord’s old prayers. The ones before the rains. He noticed there were a lot of rejected prayers from people who wanted God to smote people who

believed differently than them. Lucifer noticed those types of prayers weren't happening anymore, because the people below knew they were in it together. That old dirty Devil hatched a devious scheme. The Devil told the angels, "We're going to have a ball. A masquerade ball on Earth. I want you to invite all of the people." The angels always a joyful bunch became excited at the thought of a ball. So, they went to Earth with invitations in tow.

"Dear folks,

We're celebrating renewed life free of discontent.

Come one, come all. Let us rejoice together.

-L"

Well, the people became sho nuff excited. The Devil and the angels had invited them to a ball. Every man put on their best clothes and jewels for the occasion. When they arrived, they were greeted by Lucifer who then offered them masks. "We're going to rejoice and celebrate our brethren," the people said. But when they looked around, they no longer recognized their brothers and sisters. The people asked the angels,

"Where are my brethren?" But the angels did not understand the confusion of man.

"They are your brethren."

"I do not know them." Then man asked Lucifer, "Where are my brethren?" Lucifer looked out into the gathering and asked,

"Do you not see them?"

"No, I do not know these people. They are not my brethren." That Devil further sowed the confusion,

"Hmm, you sure? What about that one?"

"I know him not," man said.

“Maybe he’s your brethren too?” The Devil questioned.

“No, he can’t be. He’s too different.” Lucifer pretending to be shocked,

“Well, goodness me, I never intended to have a stranger among us.” The Devil made way to the other man, “How you likin’ the ball? Is it to your satisfaction?”

“It is indeed, but who that man that looks upon me with such anger?”

“Ain’t that your brethren?” The Devil asked.

The man shook his head, “Nah, my brother holds no hatred in his heart towards me. I don’t know him.”

Lucifer then looked confused, “Well, that’s mighty strange, indeed. You sure? Maybe your brother is mad at you. Could that not be?”

The man shook his head again, “That ain’t my brethren because no disagreement would cause his love for me to waiver.”

In faux shock the Devil covered his mouth, “Oh my! It make sense now why that man should look at you so unkindly if he is not your brother. I wonder who it could be.” The Devil made his way around the room. “Good evenin’, how you enjoyin’ yourself?”

“Not a lick!”

“Oh no, what is it that I can do?”

“This here mask you gave me don’t fit!”

“What do you mean? I made it just for you.”

“Can’t be. This here mask is mighty uncomfortable.” The Devil pretended to help the man take off his mask.

“Oh my, it seems to be stuck. Maybe I can get one of your brethren to help you take it off.”

The man shook his head, “Them ain’t my brethren. I asked ‘em for help earlier and they told me no. They looked down on me while I struggled. My brother would do no such thing.”

“I am shocked! How could they behave that way? But now that you mention it, it makes sense because the other man said there was malice in the heart of him. I wonder who that man could be if he be not your kin.” Lucifer went over to the next man and began to talk to him, “Is the ball to your satisfaction?”

“Absolutely not! Why would you bring that predator here? I am terrified he may attack us.”

Lucifer pointed at the man struggling with his mask, “Him? I’m positive yo brother means you no harm.”

“That ain’t my brethren! My brethren are comforting, not menacing.”

Lucifer put his hands on his hips, “Well, I’ll be! I just don’t know who that can be if it ain’t your brother.” Lucifer smiled with delight after he sowed confusion amongst man. It was late. So, the angels took man home. When the Lord returned, He noticed a change in man.

“What has happened?” The angels told Him about all the Devil had done and He was furious. The Lord quickly destroyed the masks the Devil put on man to show them that they were only hating their brother. But by then it was too late. Man, had let the Devil sow the seed of confusion and hate in his heart but, worse still he had allowed that seed to take root and let it blossom. The Lord did all He could to save man from the mess the Devil made. He went down to Earth. He told them about loving their brother, but the Devil made it so the confusion and hate stopped them from listening. And it’s been that way ever since. But after that, the Lord never rested again.

As Granny finished her story about all the trouble the Devil caused on Earth, the sun ducked behind the clouds. Naima stood up, hands on hips and staring at the sky and yelled, “I hope she got a belt!”

Shadow Of Doubt: Favored by God and the Devil

Vaughn woke up more excited than usual. It was the third Sunday of the month and he was going to sign with the men's choir. He had been going to practice with his grandfather and the group of elders loved having him. "Pappy!" The young boy stormed into his grandparent's room. His grandfather groaned and slid himself out of bed.

"Alright, let's get you ready. Go eat your breakfast, while I take a shower." The young man did as he was told and quickly made his way back to the kitchen where his grandmother was pulling the biscuits out of the stove and his mother was finishing his sister's hair.

"Good Morning, baby," his mother said, "You ready for your performance today?" Vaughn smiled big and hugged his mother's waist and the top of Naima's head as she was still sitting between her mother's knees.

"Boy! Move before you mess up my hair!" Naima pushed his arm off and marched back to her room to get dressed. His grandmother, giggled,

"Whew, Ruby, that girl..." she shook her head as she put a plate of pan sausage, eggs and a biscuit on the table.

"I know, she's a mess just like her daddy."

"Girl, you ought not to tell no lies like that on the Lord's Day!" Granny made a face at her daughter and Ruby stuck her tongue out at her mother. They both laughed. His grandmother walked to the refrigerator, "You want milk or juice, V?"

"Juice," he sat at the table and began eating fast.

"Vaughn, slow down. You don't want to get sick and not get to sing, do you?" His mother said kissing the top of his head. He slowed down and chewed the food that was stuffed in his little cheeks.

After cleaning his plate, he ran back into his room and quickly put on his Sunday suit and ran into the bathroom where Fitz was brushing his hair and watching their father, Justé, shave. “Tie it!” He yelled at his older brother, who rolled his eyes in pretend annoyance that his smile contradicted.

“Ooh wee V,” his father said watching his sons through the mirror, “You are one good lookin dude! Almost as good lookin as me.” He teased.

“But neither of you hold a match to me,” Fitz grinned stroking his bare chin. Pappy walking past them in the hall, hollered back,

“And all of ya’ll are something ugly standing next to me!”

They took two cars, ladies in the Sunday car, a pristine 1972 El Dorado and the lads in their grandfather’s new pickup truck. The men had to get to church earlier so that Justé, the children’s father, could set up the sound equipment before service and Fitz had to set up his drums. The church was old and only had a congregation of approximately three hundred. Generations of black families made their ways back to the country church on Sundays to get filled up with the Word and a renewed sense of self.

While his family got ready, Vaughn found his friend, Brother Self waiting in the choir stand. Brother Self was ninety-five years old and partially blind from cataracts, but was a dedicated member of the men’s choir, a Sunday School teacher and the founder and assistant coach of the Red Tail Angels, Vaughn’s baseball team. “Vaughn! I was wondering where you were.” He opened his arms to hug the small boy. Vaughn normally unaware of his strength gently embraced him and kissed his friend’s cheek. Brother Self had been sick, and Vaughn had been to his house almost every day to check on him.

“How do you feel today?” Vaughn asked sitting close to him on the pew. Brother Self grabbed the young boy’s hand and tapped it with his other.

“Fine. Just fine,” Brother Self smiled. “Doctor says my strength is back.” Vaughn puffed out his chest a little more.

“Did she tell you that it was the peanut butter jelly sandwiches I brought you? I put a little honey in them too, because mama always gives me honey when I’m sick.” The older gentleman nodded,

“She said without a shadow of doubt.” Vaughn looked confused.

“What does that mean, Brother Self?”

“Shadow of doubt means that nothing is hanging over it. Does that make sense?” Vaughn shook his head. “Have you ever heard the story of Shadow Ofdoubt?” Vaughn shook his head again. Brother Self turned to face Vaughn who was already hanging to every word. “Shadow Ofdoubt’s story began before he was even born. God and his Devil son had been in a battle over souls. The Devil not one to really consider the consequences of his actions was starting to experience regret. It started when he began to live amongst the humans and fell in love with a beautiful woman who bore him a daughter. He witnessed firsthand how hard life was for the humans and he saw why God had loved them. His love for the girl and his wife left him with a profound regret for attempting to corrupt Job. For Job was an incorruptible soul, the only one there had ever been. That was until the day Shadow Ofdoubt was born. Shadow Ofdoubt had a pure soul, steadfast and faithful. You may be wondering who would name children such names, but the name came naturally as if a whisper from God Himself. Shadow Ofdoubt was named so because there wasn’t a shadow of doubt that God had his hand on him. Shadow was born with a silver handprint on his right shoulder.”

Shadow Ofdoubt had two siblings, Reasonable Negro and Happy Negro. Reasonable and Happy were named so because of their dispositions. When the midwife slapped Reasonable's backside, she did not scream and cry as most babies do but gave the elderly woman a disapproving look that made her profusely apologize to the infant while she placed her in her mother's arms. When it was Happy's day to see the light, he was introduced to the world by another midwife (the elder's daughter) who did the same, he welcomed the pop with a fit of giggles. The Negro came from, well, the fact that from the beginning it was the only thing their father had ever been called. The man didn't know any better and believed Negro was his name and naïvely passed it on to his children.

Negro was a hardworking man with hands that were rough and as strong as brick. But when it came to his wife, Goldy and his three little ones he became as soft as a newborn lamb. Shadow Ofdoubt loved and admired his father, but he also knew there was a world out beyond their warm, love-filled shack, well-worked patch of land and an old stubborn ass they called Nanny. "Daddy."

"Yes, Son." They sat in the fields sharing the water skin looking up at the star filled sky. Nanny, finally untied from the plow, was chewing on the dandelions and grass in the fields outside the fence.

"I have to leave home," Shadow said nervously.

"I know." His father handed him the water without breaking his trance from the stars above. The night sky was dark, but the stars were brilliant and giving light similar to that of a full moon. "Son, we all have to leave the nest. You're no different from me or my Pa or his Pap before. You're a good boy, strong and brave and smarter than I could ever be. You have your own life...I was just waiting for you to tell me you was ready for it." Shadow looked at his

father. His work and worry etched face looked peaceful, though there were tears running down his face. He hugged and kissed his daddy. He handed Shadow the container, a book of matches and his only picture of his family. "I'll tell them you said goodbye." His father whispered watching as Shadow hesitated, glancing back at the shack behind them. Shadow grunted and walked off into the woods ahead. Not once did he look back, knowing that if he did, he may never leave.

Shadow Ofdoubt was headed to the city, a place he had been sheltered from. A place where his mother, a savvy woman who was constantly underestimated because of her tiny stature and remarkable beauty, had told him evil didn't lurk but strutted right on out in the streets. Shadow didn't believe there could be a place where the children of God did not chase wickedness out. Surely, they had heard of Nineveh or Sodom. Shadow recollected the preacher's words by the river that day. It was baptism Sunday and the preacher was working hard to collect repentant souls. "You mustn't let evil in. You have to shut it out! Can't be no room for evil, can't be no room for sin, can't be no room for blasphemy in your homes, brothers and sisters. You cannot abide by no evil, no matter its form. The Devil don't always come as a snake. He can come as a beautiful woman like Dinah. He can come in the form of the leader like Pharaoh. That Devil can come disguised as your neighbors, your children even and you got to shut it out!" Shadow didn't know any kind of fool that would play with the Devil. So, when he got to the city with all its greed and gluttony all lit and on display, he found himself itching to run back into the safety of home with his Pa, Ma, Reasonable, Happy and Nanny.

"You're not from around here," he heard the smile before he saw it. It was bright, friendly and curiously peeking out of her full lips. Shadow Ofdoubt shook his head. She looked away from him and onto the busy street ahead of them. "Something, isn't it? I remember feeling

like you did when I first made my way to the big city from the pig farm where my mammy and daddy raised me.”

“Why’d you come out here?” He said looking at the people rushing from shop to shop.

“To find a husband.” He turned and looked at her. She smirked but never changed her focus. “Don’t worry, I already found one.” Shadow Ofdoubt breathed a sigh of relief. While the woman was admittedly beautiful, God had given him no sign that he was ready for marriage. Shadow was trying to become a man first and no woman or children were gonna help him do that. “Do you know where you’re going...”

“Uh, Shadow, Shadow Ofdoubt.” He reached to shake her hand, “And no ma’am, I have no idea.”

“Well, Shadow Ofdoubt,” She took his hand and gently squeezed it, “I’m quite pleased to meet you. I am Mrs. Yemina Lightbearer.” He nodded. “Well, as someone who once walked a mile in your shoes allow me to help you. My husband is a powerful and very wealthy man, I’m sure he can help you find a job and a place to settle.”

“Oh, I could not ask all of that from you and your husband. You don’t even know me.”

“Mr. Shadow, even though they are strangers...” she smiled again and hooked her arm into his leading him through the chaos that circled them. Shadow couldn’t help but look like a fish out of water. He was dressed in simple coveralls that had seen their fair share of hard days on the farm. His shoes were fortunately new as he had completely busted up the pair before. Shadow was thankful that at least his feet made him seem as if he could eventually find a place among the finely dressed men and women walking by him. By the time he realized the crowds were thinning and there was a comforting silence between them he saw the flash of a shiny weathervane on top of the roof. The weathervane was a curious design. Instead of the usual cock

or horse, the vane had a dancing daemon. The house, if you could call it that, stood taller than any building Shadow had ever seen, even the recent discovery of the city's courthouse and church steeple that seemed to peek out from the clouds. He stopped in his tracks and stared with his mouth gaped open. He was glad his mother wasn't there to see him,

“Standing there lookin’ like a fish ready for the hook and pan!”

“You live here?” Mrs. Lightbearer laughed,

“You live here too now,” she walked ahead of him to open the door, “Welcome home, Shadow Ofdoubt.” He drug his feet, feeling even more uneasy about his situation. The preacher had warned them of,

“The ways of the wicked. They’re sirens, bringin men to their death with the promise of money, power, pretty trinkets.” When he made his way through the threshold of the intricately engraved mahogany door, he gasped. He had never seen such fine wood floors, or furniture with accents of pearl or gold. A young girl came toward them and stretched out her hands. Shadow was confused and reached to embrace her in a hug. The young girl backed away, either disgusted or fearful, he could not tell.

“Your hat, Shadow.” He sheepishly smiled and handed her his beat up old cowboy hat he was given by his father when his mother gave him a new one for their anniversary. The girl, clearly disgusted by the sweat and grease stained hat, walked quickly out of the room. “Maybe my husband has some clothes he can loan you until you get settled. You’re quite slender but I’m sure Ori can take some things in for you.”

“Ma’am, this is too much. I can’t accept this.” Shadow felt suffocated by all the things, all the grandeur. “I’m just a country boy, I’m not use to such things.”

“Oh, my dear wife has rescued another soul, I hear!” A booming voice filled the room before the man. He, too, was shiny and opulent. He had never seen a man so pale, and delicate. The man reached for Shadow’s hand but when getting a good look at the boy, thought better of it and bowed. “I’m Adlai Lightbearer, a pleasure to make your acquaintance...”

“This, dear, is Shadow Ofdoubt,” She kissed her husband gently on both cheeks and stood next to him as her husband inspected their guest.

“Shadow Ofdoubt,” Mr. Lightbearer raised his eyebrow. “You’ll have to tell me how you came to that name over dinner. My family and staff will ensure you’re properly cared for until then. I must be off, beloved, my duties call.” Mr. Lightbearer was like a whirlwind in his own home. Things seemed to rotate around him and then he was gone, the room, though, had evidence of his wake.

Shadow was, indeed, cared for, he’d hadn’t had a hot bath in years since his siblings had came along. He often washed after them and by the time that happened the water had cooled and turned a little cloudy. Mrs. Lightbearer had stumbled on some clothes her husband had as a younger man, before the wealth and seven course meals had built his girth. The young girl, Ori, brought him the fresh clothing. When she saw Shadow’s silvery mark she gasped and ran leaving the clothes on the floor where she once stood.

Shadow Ofdoubt watched the Lightbearers before touching any of the fine plates and silverware that was on their table. He tried to go eat in the kitchen, but they wouldn’t hear of it. “Shadow, my boy, you’re our guest. How would it look if we treated you in such a manner?” Shadow didn’t know how to answer, but he certainly did not feel deserving of their kindness. He thought about the old preacher’s lesson on mercy. Shadow had understood mercy from God,

from His son, but he couldn't understand why the Lightbearers were so merciful? He could not figure out what was the reason they had chosen him.

"Tell me your story, Shadow Ofdoubt," Adlai relaxed in his chair holding a glass of wine.

"There's not much to tell, Mr. Lightbearer. I was born, was reared and went on my way. My people are good God fearing, hardworking people who taught me to be the same."

"God fearing, you say," Mr. Lightbearer sat up more attentive, "I do say, that's good advice." He stood contemplating the phrase, repeating it under his breath. As he muttered to himself, he took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves to reveal a mark similar to Shadow's. On Mr. Lightbearer's forearm there was a handprint, but it was black and scarred as if the hand was hotter than coal when it grabbed him. "God fearing, is a lesson I too learned, but I learned it a little too late."

"Ori tells us you too have a mark," Mrs. Lightbearer said between sips of her drink.

"God has his hand on me," Shadow Ofdoubt stared at her husband's scarred appendage.

"You have a position of favor. Don't squander it," Mr. Lightbearer rolled down his sleeve and they finished dinner in contemplative silence.

After dinner, Shadow walked out into the night for some fresh air. There was a mist rising from the dew-covered land. There was a small but chilling breeze that went right through the fine clothes the Lightbearers had given him. He made his way towards the barn around the side of the house and noticed a red and gray horse pacing in his stall. Shadow walked toward the animal and began to hum a song his little brother Happy would hum to himself when he was scared. The horse stopped, walked towards Shadow, met his eyes and listened.

When the sun came up, Shadow was waiting for Mr. Lightbearer in his office.

“Well good morning, Shadow,” He lit a cigar and sat behind his desk, “I see you believe in starting the day early as well. A good quality in a man.” Shadow nodded,

“Mr. Lightbearer, I want to buy your horse.”

“What horse?”

“The red and gray one.”

“Ah, Shadow, that horse hasn’t been fully broken. I’m afraid a horse like that would hurt you. I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if I let something like that happen.” Shadow signaled for Mr. Lightbearer to follow him to the porch. The morning was just beginning but the sun was especially bright making it hard for the master of the house to see the horse standing quietly feet from his front door. Shadow clicked his tongue and the horse stepped to him and placed his head on Shadow’s shoulder.

“I’ll be damned, that horse has given some of my best men trouble. How did you do it?” Shadow shrugged while stroking the horse’s nose. “I’ll tell you what, work for me. I need help around here and any man who can figure out that horse, has what it takes.”

“I’d just as well pay you for him, I got plans to tend my own land, Mr. Lightbearer.”

“With what money, Shadow?” Shadow fiddled with the bits in his pockets and looked at the red and gray horse. His eyes fell and he reached out his hand. “Shadow, out here, a handshake and a man’s word aren’t much value. Always get a signature.”

“Shadow Ofdoubt is about as pure as the light, honey. I’d trust him with my life,” Mrs. Lightbearer came out to the porch.

“Oh, dear, it’s not Shadow I don’t trust. But Shadow needs to learn quickly that he won’t make it far expecting men to be honorable when there’s money to be made.”

“Well, now that’s true, Shadow. My husband has swindled quite a few to get where he is today.”

“How do I know you wouldn’t try to fool me?”

“I’m trying what you said, God fearing... But, just to make sure I’m not up to my old tricks, check the fine print.” A wide smile spread across his face. Shadow felt momentarily like prey, but he felt a reassuring warmth on his shoulder.

Shadow Ofdoubt signed the contract. Shadow worked the land. Shadow grazed the animals. Shadow built the farm up better than any other farm around.

“Hot day. I thought you may be thirsty,” Ori brought Shadow some water out to the field.

“Mighty kind of you, Miss Ori. Haven’t been seeing you ‘round lately. The Lightbearer’s keeping you busy too?” Her head turned slightly like a puppy trying to understand his owner,

“I’m not sure what you mean, but I have been away for a few weeks. I’m surprised you noticed, Shadow Ofdoubt,” Shadow was now confused and handed her the glass. She took it, smiled, “Don’t let me keep you from your work,” and she walked back to the house.

It wasn’t long after that Mr. Lightbearer, honoring their contract, gave Shadow the horse.

“Whatchu gonna call him?” Mrs. Lightbearer eyed the curious horse.

“Baldwin,” Shadow said proudly. Shadow mounted the horse and hooked a small satchel to his saddle. “Mr. and Mrs. Lightbearer, I thank you kindly for your generosity. But I have to be on my way.” Mr. Lightbearer held out his hand to Shadow.

“We should be giving all the thanks,” he smiled as Shadow took his hand. Mr. Lightbearer handed him a box.

“What’s this?”

“For your land.” Shadow nodded his head to the missus and rode away. He didn’t get far before he heard some hooves behind him.

“Shadow!” Ori rode toward him, waving his old hat. He hopped off Baldwin and approached the girl. Shadow hadn’t taken much notice to how beautiful the girl was until that moment. “You forgot something.” He took the hat from her and admired how clean it was. It looked practically brand new.

“I thank you, my daddy gave it to me. Can’t believe I forgot it.”

“I figured it was something of import,” She smiled and turned around back toward the Lightbearer’s home.

“Uh wait,” Shadow called. Ori turned around and stared at him blankly. Shadow realizing, he didn’t know what he wanted to say looked down at his hat.

“Yes?”

“Yes. Um. I’ve never been one for talkin’ much. I’ve never really had much to say. And now that I have somethin’ to say, I’m not quite sure how to say it, Miss Ori.” She looked at him confused,

“I, too, sometimes find it hard to say goodbye.” Shadow looked up at her and stepped forward.

“Goodbye is something I never want to say to you, not ever.” Ori blinked and softened instantly not only realizing Shadow’s meaning but, that she also felt the same way.

“You’re going to have to talk to my father then,” it was Shadow who now blinked as she continued on back to the Lightbearer’s home. Shadow quickly mounted Baldwin and followed.

“Your father works for the Lightbearers too?”

“Shadow, I do not work for the Lightbearers. I am one.” Shadow stopped. Ori laughed and continued riding. When they reached the house, Mrs. Lightbearer was sitting on the porch drinking tea and reading a book,

“Well, Ori, you’ve brought our good friend back to us, I see. Your father will be ever so happy, I do believe he’s in his office pouting.” Ori nodded and walked into the house. Shadow followed still confused. Ori walked into Mr. Lightbearer’s office. Shadow stood outside astounded,

“Adlai’s your pa?” he called from outside the door. Ori stepped back out into the hall.

“He is.”

“But he’s.”

“White. My mother and he met in a very different place where things like that weren’t so unusual.”

“Ori? What’s all this about? And is that Shadow I hear?” Adlai Lightbearer stepped out and looked at the two whispering, “Ah, you’ve just told him.” Ori smiled.

“Father, Shadow Ofdoubt has something to ask of you,” She stepped out of the way of the two men. Shadow stood blankly, processing his situation. Ori nudged him.

“Mr. Lightbearer, I came to ask you, sir. If I could, if you so saw fit as to allow me to. If would let me, um, I know I’m probably not what you had in…”

“The boy wants to marry her, Adlai!” Yemina approached them and hugged Ori.

“Is this true?” Mr. Lightbearer looked at Shadow. Shadow looked at Ori and steeled himself,

“Yes. I’ve come to ask you could I marry Ori.”

“Isn’t that just wonderful, Adlai?” Mr. Lightbearer grunted and walked back behind his desk and sat. Ori and Yemina followed.

“He’s not like us, dear,” he lit his cigar. “He’s a good man.”

“Ori, deserves that doesn’t she?” Yemina touched her husband’s shoulder.

“She does but as you well know, being a Lightbearer has a price.”

“She won’t be a Lightbearer anymore, dear.” Adlai looked up at his daughter.

“Shadow’s the best type of man, Ori, I couldn’t want better for you. I’ve just tainted enough.”

“Mr. Lightbearer, even in the Lion’s den, God kept Daniel,” Shadow stepped in. “The Devil himself couldn’t keep the Lord from me.”

“The Devil himself, you say?” Mr. Lightbearer stood taking measure again of the young man.

“He’s kept me this far, Mr. Lightbearer,” Adlai nodded.

“Ori, somehow without me ever showing you what a good man is, you’ve found one.” He clapped Shadow on his back. “I’ll be glad to call you son, too.”

Ori and Shadow were married. They set off to find their own land, with their horses Baldwin and Amala, and their box of seeds. There was a patch by a stream. The clearing was set between a hill and woods. But when they went to buy the land, they were told they couldn’t have it. Ori, heartbroken, wrote home and told her father of the incident. Before no time, he had purchased the land for them.

Ori and Shadow with a little help from his brother and sister seeded and plowed the land. Reasonable and Ori raised chickens and sold eggs. The purchase of the eggs led to the purchase of two pigs. The two pigs made six and they bread the pigs and sold pork. The sale of pork led to

the purchase of sheep and the women sold wool. Soon, the brothers had cultivated the land to growing yams, greens and hemp.

Shadow, ever a proud man, packed up his family and went to the Lightbearer's. "I won't start our life in debt with your father," Shadow told his wife. Reasonable and Happy went along fascinated by the tales they heard of the in laws who had so eagerly accepted their brother.

"Ori told me he was the Devil, Shadow," His sister whispered to him late one night.

"That may be, but the Devil I know," Shadow chuckled.

"You do not worry about the damnation of your souls?"

"Sister, reasonable as you are, your faith needs work. God has never forsaken me." When they arrived to the Lightbearer homestead they were welcomed with a feast. After, Shadow and his father in law sat on the porch sharing a bottle of wine.

"Shadow, it pleased me to help you and Ori acquire your land. I'm very honored to be able to help. I do not consider it a debt but a gift."

"Adlai, what kind of husband or man would I be if I could not provide on my own."

"Shadow Ofdoubt, still the very best kind. But I understand." When they returned home, the family was stopped by one of their workers.

"Boss! Boss! They done razed it all!" The man was out of breath and covered in soot. "I couldn't stop 'em, they'd a killed me." Shadow gave the man some water and told him to stay behind with the rest of his family. When he made it to his patch of land between the wood, the mountain and the stream all his saw was blackness and smoke. They had burned it all. All he had worked for, all he had built, all that God had blessed him with had been taken away. Reasonable, Happy, Ori and the worker soon arrived to see the damage.

"Who'd do this?" Ori asked choking back her tears.

“This the work of the Devil, I tell you,” Happy said shaking his head.

“The Devil got no cause to do this to me. Besides the Devil fears the Lord. And I know the Lord is on my side.” Ori grabbed her husband’s hand.

“This wasn’t the work of the Devil. He ain’t touched a hair on the head of a child of the Lord since Job.”

“I don’t doubt God’s hand on me. I don’t fear the Devil and I definitely don’t fear man.” Then Shadow started working. He didn’t stop to rest for days. The seeds the Lightbearer’s gave him seemed impervious to the flames. Within days the land was fertile again. The livestock returned from their hiding places within the woods. Shadow Ofdoubt was blessed. The land wasn’t the only thing that was fertile and shortly after Shadow and Ori welcomed twins, Proud and Faithful. The family continued to thrive on their land. Shadow had accomplished his dream and more.

As the family slept, men of the town came to the land with torches and ill intent. They did not believe Shadow Ofdoubt and his family belonged on that land. They threw the torches on the roof of their home, but the flames did not catch. The next night the men returned, this time they brought their rifles, but all of their guns jammed. The following night the men brought poison to kill the crops, but the plants just seemed to grow stronger than before. The men came the next night and put foxes in the field with the sheep, but the foxes laid down in the soft grass uninterested in the fat ewes and rams before them. The men came every night for the next month and nothing seemed to work. They could not understand how all of their efforts to get Shadow and his family to leave had failed. As if their failures weren’t enough injury to their pride, Shadow was thriving in spite of them. Many of the men who wanted to destroy Shadow had

found themselves struggling to maintain their own homesteads. Many of them had been forced to sell their lands for very cheap in order to avoid ruin. One by one the men moved away.

Ori and Shadow seeing the potential bought a plot for Reasonable. And then, they bought a plot for Happy. As the family's wealth grew more negroes came to the land to start their own farms and businesses. The town had changed quite a lot from when Shadow Ofdoubt and his wife moved there. Many of the people who had tried to keep them from buying the land no longer lived there. Those who knew of the attempts to ruin him, referred to him as the man covered by God and the Devil alike.

"I thought the Devil's name was Lucifer," Vaughn said after the story was finished, "That's what Granny told us."

"Whatchu think Lucifer means, boy?" Brother Self asked him.

"The bad angel?"

Brother Self grunted, "Uh uh, Lucifer means light bearer."

"Whoa!" Vaughn said with his eyes widening more at the sound of the sudden sound of the organ than the revelation. "Did you just make that up, Brother Self?" Vaughn asked twisting up his face.

"Don't believe me? Go ask your Granny. See what she says," he shrugged ambivalent.

"I will," the boy said resolutely as he sweetly straightened the gentleman's tie before they stood to sing.

The Sister Plait

Naima's team had won the game. It was a hard-fought win and her uniform showed every indication of it. She was covered in red dust and sweat. She was a little sore not from her sliding home, but the umpire calling her out. She knew she was safe. Since her team won, she decided not to focus too much on it. She was happy to get in the hot bath her mother had drawn for her. Naima cupped her hands and blew the bubbles up over head and let the drift back down on her like snow. Naima splashed around a little before her mother came in and sat on a short stool next to the tub. She had a pitcher and some towels with her.

Naima turned her back to her mother and closed her eyes. She sighed when the warm water began to run down her head and face. She pretended she was standing under a waterfall. By the time she felt her mother scrubbing and scratching her scalp she had almost dozed off. The shampoo smelled like lemons. "You ok?" Her mother asked.

"Yeah." She felt the warm water rinse the suds down her body. After she got out the tub and dried off. She put on her bathrobe, wrapped her hair up in the towel and made her way to the living room where her mother was sitting in a chair with a pillow on the ground in front of her. Naima sat on the pillow and leaned back against the chair between her mother's knees. She felt the slight jostle of her mother drying her hair some more before she felt the comb parting her hair and her mother's finger rubbing oil on the exposed part of her scalp.

"What do you think we should do to this head of yours, miss ma'am?" Naima didn't answer because she knew her mother wasn't asking for her opinion just merely talking aloud. Her granny came in and sat with them. Scratch came and laid his head on Naima's lap and she parted his fur on his back and started to braid it.

“I think you should do to plaits on the side and braid them together in the back,” Granny said looking at Ruby playing around in the small girl’s head.

“You used to call that the Jelly and Bean,” her mother sung the words jelly and bean in a tune that Naima had never heard.

“You remember that?”

“Yes, indeed. How did it go? I believe you used to always start by explaining how love was hard or something.”

“Yeah, I was trying to keep you and Rey from killing each other. Shame how two sisters could fight so much.”

“Reyline was always starting something. Anyway, you would start it with explaining love is messy, love is work, love is hard. You know when you’re sick and your mother rocks you and sings you songs to ease your pain? That’s love. You know when you fight with your sibling, but you make up a little while later? That’s love. When you practice really hard because your team is counting on you, that’s love. Love is doing things that you may not like sometimes for people you love. Love is hard. But love is worth everything.”

There were two sisters who loved each other more than anyone else in the world. One was called Jelly and the other was called Bean. Jelly and Bean were always together. They were together at school, they were together when they played, they were together when they went to sleep. Jelly and Bean took care of each other because their parents were sick. Sometimes they were so sick they couldn’t get out of bed. Sometimes they were so sick they had to go search for medicine from the men who made people well. The medicine men made people well all day and night. They worked on corners and in empty places.

Ma and Pa often stayed with the medicine men, taking their medicine and trying to get well; leaving Jelly and Bean alone to take care of one another. Jelly and Bean made each other sandwiches and told each other stories. They helped each other with their homework. When they got scared, they would comfort each other. When they got scared, they kissed away the tears. Jelly and Bean loved each other so. They would sing songs when they walked to and from school.

Jelly and Bean put them together is the sweetest thing.

Jelly and Bean take them apart and it's nasty indeed.

Jelly and Bean put them together make a happy team.

Jelly and Bean take them apart watch their hearts bleed.

Jelly and Bean put them together is a sugary dream.

Jelly and Bean had a nightly ritual. They would oil one another's scalps and brush each other's long hair before going to bed each night. Ma, once in jest, braided the girls' hair together. "Now, you two are truly inseparable!" The girls laughed but they decided to sleep that way that night, holding each other close. When they felt most scared of the night, their parents' sickness or of what may come, they would plait their long hair together and hold each other 'til the morning.

One night, the sisters were sleep in such a way after finding Ma and Pa had not come home again. Never had they been absent from one another more than three days, but that night was the fifth. Jelly and Bean slept lightly listening for their parents' familiar struggling steps to come through the door. They did hear steps that night but not the steps of Ma and Pa. They didn't recognize the steps, they didn't recognize the faces, they didn't recognize the voices and the girls were scared.

The Unknowns told the girls they had to leave home. The Unknowns said that Ma and Pa weren't coming back. The Unknowns tried to separate Jelly and Bean. One of the Unknowns started to unbraid the sisters' hair. But the plait would not obey the Unknown's fingers. The Unknown tried to brush the plait loose, but the hairs seemed to refuse the coaxing of the bristles. The Unknown tried to comb out the plait, but the hairs seemed to bind tighter breaking the teeth. The Unknown tried everything they could think of, but the plait would not let loose.

The Unknown were dumbfounded. They were tired and frustrated. Angry that they could not separate the girls, one of the Unknown pulled out a pocketknife and cut the plait. Jelly and Bean cried out so fiercely that the Unknowns were frozen. They dare not move as the girls, with tears down their face, picked up the plait and ran. Jelly and Bean ran as fast as they could, they ran past the medicine men, they ran past the school, they ran past the empty houses, they ran past the lit stores and the men that played dominoes in the front, they ran past the church and to the bayou.

At the bayou Jelly and Bean buried their plait amongst the cattails and dandelions. As they piled the dirt on to the severed plait, they let tears fall from their faces and they sang their song and they fell asleep.

Jelly and Bean put them together is the sweetest thing.

Jelly and Bean take them apart and it's nasty indeed.

Jelly and Bean put them together make a happy team.

Jelly and Bean take them apart watch their hearts bleed.

Jelly and Bean put them together is a sugary dream.

It was the next morning when the Unknown found the girls. Or, I should say, the Unknown found evidence of the girls' presence. There was a tree with a trunk broad and wide. On the trunk was the form of Jelly and Bean sleeping in one another's arms and their hair braided together. The tree was tall, and the twigs were thick and covered with dense leaves like vines. The vines were twisted like the braids in the sisters' hair, it flowed, thick and beautifully. The tree was so big that it had shattered the bridge over the bayou replacing it with a strong and proud root.

The Unknown tried to cut the tree down, hoping to get the girls back. But every time they struck the tree with an axe, the roots went deeper into the ground and the branches stretched further into the city. They tried digging up the tree but found their equipment could not reach the depths. They tried to burn the tree, but the flames would never catch. Everything they tried made the tree grow stronger, bigger, greener. By the time they tired the tree covered the town, it had emptied out every abandoned home, it had covered the corners once occupied by the medicine men, it ran through the streets. The vines circled the school with a lush green shield. The tree was so great that the city had no choice but to find a way to build around it.

Sisters' Love became the city's new name. It became a place of hope. It became a place where families and neighborhoods could thrive. It became a place of joy and peace. A place where sisters could be happy and safe. It became a place safe from the unknown. It was a miracle many people said, and it was. There is no miracle on Earth greater than the fierceness of a sisters' love.

Naima's mother tapped her back, having finished her hair. She popped up and ran to the bathroom to see her hair. Looking in the mirror, she could see the two side braids. She smiled while twisting herself to the left and to the right trying to see where the two came together as one.

Little Brother and the Conch Snail's Quest

Their father was at the sink washing dishes. Fitz could smell the rice and peas. He looked around and saw the pork drying on paper towels while the oil heated on the stove. "Wash your hands and come help me," his father said putting the last of the pots on the drying rack.

Fitz ran to the bathroom and scrubbed his hands and face clean. When he came back to the kitchen his father pointed to the bowl of water sitting on the table. He grabbed the plantains, a knife, small cutting board and got busy chopping. He put the plantains in the hot water. His father poured some vinegar and salted the water before bringing the mix back to the kitchen counter. "I spoke to Nann, today. She said she sent you something about a project?"

"Yeah, my teacher asked us to talk about our family histories. I called Nann and she said she would send me some things to help me with it." His father nodded looking away from the food he was prepping.

"I'm surprised, you didn't want to talk about your Pappy playing baseball?" Fitz shrugged.

"I did that last year. I am going to talk about soccer though. She said she had pictures of you playing when you were my age," Fitz took the masher from the drawer and began to flatten the softened plantains as his father started frying the griot. "She said something about sending a shell," Fitz looked quizzically at his father.

"Oh, that's why she was on me," his father smiled, "I guess, I haven't been doing a very good job of making sure you know things about your Haitian culture. My mother used to tell me and your Uncle James this story all the time, I'm sure she's surprised you've never heard it." Fitz didn't say anything, he just looked at his father cooking. "No time like the present as they say. Little Brother was sick on the boat."

Little Sister rubbed his back as the boat rocked and swayed through the rough ocean, "Ti Frè, you'll be fine," she tried to comfort him. Little brother had always struggled in boats. He once told his father while he held a cool rag to his son's face,

“Papa, I feel like a fish in the net. I want to get free.”

“Son, the water *is* freedom. The boat is a cage. I don’t like to sail either.”

“But you don’t get sick.”

“I know how to fight the sickness.”

“How do you do that?”

“I become the sea.”

“Papa, I am serious!”

“I am too!”

“You can’t become the sea!”

“I can, and you can too,” his father tickled him and put him to sleep. Little Brother remembered that night. He wondered where his Papa was now. He groaned and rested his head on the cool, wet gunwale.

Little Brother was supposed to be presenting his science project for school that day when mother woke him and Little Sister in the night, “Hurry! We must go!” He barely had time to rub the crust out of his eyes before he was crowding on the boat with his mother, Little Sister, Cousin Wood and Auntie Catheline.

“Where is Papa?” The children asked. Their father was nowhere in sight when they boarded the boat.

“Mwen di, fè vit!” They knew the question was not to be asked twice. They boarded the rickety boat with the clothes on their back and a knapsack filled with the items their mother thought necessary.

She packed some biscuits and a thermos filled with tea, three plantain sandwiches, socks, underwear, and a conch shell their father gave their mother while celebrating their fifteenth wedding anniversary at Jacmel. Little Brother closed his eyes trying to feel solid again. The way the water moved the boat he felt like he was becoming part of the sea. He felt the bubbles floating against his skin. He felt the dark coolness of the undercurrent, just below the surface.

Little Brother felt the smooth slip of creatures swimming, slithering, and crawling beside him. He felt the rhythmic motion of the waves more comforting within than experiencing it confined in the rickety boat with forty odd strangers.

In the deep waters by the reef, Little Brother heard the words “Welcome home,” echoing with the current. The voice sounded familiar but lighter. “Byenvini nan kay la,” the voice seemed to swirl around Little Brother. “Byenvini nan kay la, Ti Frè.”

“Papa?”

“Wi.”

“Papa, this is not home. Home is on the island. With the sand and the sun and trees and Mama and Ti Sè.”

“Pitit gason m, this too, is your home. Home is the place where you are safe. Home is a place where you have peace.”

“I do feel safe. I do feel peace. But this is very different from the home I know.” Little Brother felt a tug and he found himself sinking. His father’s voice stayed with him until he reached the reef. He saw a conch snail in the sand.

“Papa, is that you?”

“Yes, son.”

“Where’s Mama and Ti Sè?”

“Safe.”

“Why are you a snail? What am I?”

“I chose this form. You must choose yours.”

“How do I choose?”

“You’ve already decided.” As soon as his father finished the words. Little Brother felt solid again. He felt not hands, not feet, but he felt a body. He swam around trying to see his form.

“What am I? What am I?”

“You are you.”

“Papa...” Little Brother whined.

“Hey, Snail! Be careful around that stingray,” A giant king prawn spoke from the reef.

“I’m a stingray!”

“Thanks Astride, I was trying to make him figure it out. This is my son.”

“Oh, Little Brother, welcome home! We’ve been wondering when we were going to meet you.”

“Who are you?”

“What do you mean? I’m a king prawn.” The prawn swam back into the coral. Little Brother could have sworn he was smiling.

“Papa, this is strange.”

“No, the land is strange. This is home and soon you’ll understand.”

“Haiti is home.”

“Pitit gason m, land is a strange thing. One day the land is for this people. Then the land is for another people. Then they fight over the land. Mothers lose husbands and sons over land. Land is fickle. Water is constant. The sea is home.”

“Is that why Mama made us get on the boat?”

“Wi,”

“Why are we going to a new land? Why do we not all live in the sea?”

“It’s not your time yet. You are needed up there. It is a land that belongs to one people that is surrounded by land from another. You will find they are not wanted, and they will not want you. You, Ti Frè, must bring rust from the bay, leaves of the sweet reed and light from the place they call sunshine before you can come home again. Ti Frè, you must be strong, patient and brave because you have many lessons to learn. But when you do, I’ll be happy to welcome you home again.”

When Little Brother opened his eyes, his face was wet from the waves splashing against the hull. His mother smiled knowingly.

“How was the old snail?”

“He was fine.”

A big ship approached their little boat. Little Brother could not figure out the words on the boat DRAUG TSAOC SU, but the men wore the same thing and they looked very serious. Their mother pulled Little Sister next to her. The serious men on the DRAUG TSAOC SU took Little Brother and his family to an island.

“Manman,” Cousin Wood cried out as they walked toward the tents. The serious men surrounded the boy and his mother. They took the woman and sent her to a different set of tents. Little Brother grabbed the little boy’s hand and made silly faces at him to stop him from crying for his mother.

“Wood, why they name you that?” The boy sniffed, confused by Little Brother’s question. “Is it because of your head?” Little Brother knocked on it. Wood listened. “No. No. That can’t be it.” Little Brother searched the boy, “Is it because you’re tall?” Then Little Brother squatted on his knees to make himself shorter than his little cousin. The boy smiled. “Maybe. Or is it cause you’re strong like a wood?” Little Brother felt the boy’s muscles and tickled him. Cousin Wood laughed, “Ah! That’s what it is! You and I we’ll be strong for our manmans, wi?”

The boy nodded. Little Brother smiled at him and let a tear fall from his eye. Wood wiped it away and hugged him. “See, you are the strongest wood I know.”

The boys went to the tent with Little Sister and Mama. Mama sat Wood in her lap and comforted him until he fell asleep. “Catheline, she’s been sick.”

“You think the serious men will make her well?” Little Sister said wrapping a blanket around her cousin. Mama shrugged staring at the boy.

“I’ll take care of him,” Little Brother said. “I’ll take care of all of us.” Mama smiled.

“Ti Frè, one day, I have no doubt you will. But, until that day, it is my job to be the Mama.” He nodded. “Wood will be with us. He will be my son and he will be your brother until your Tati Catheline comes back.”

It had been a while since that day. They all lived in the tent still and Wood was almost as tall as Little Sister. The tent city was almost like home. The same people were there, the weather was the same, but it was different. There was a darkness in that place even with all of its sunshine. People there tried to ignore it, they sang songs, played foubòl, they told jokes, but it was there, always weighing them down. Little Brother sang to the sea every day hoping for answers from the old snail about where to begin his quest.

Oh sea, ooooh sea

I do not see

the things you wish for me to see

the moon creates the waves

pushes and pulls

show the way

to this young fool.

One such day Little Brother and Wood were walking along the bay with one of the nicer of the serious men. He called himself, Jay. Jay would walk with boys and let them play on the beach. Jay had the “soccer ball” and he threw it in the sand. Wood and the other boys kicked the ball around and cheered. Little Brother sat on the rocks singing his song. “Heads up!” Little Brother concentrating on the waves did not hear the warning and was smacked on the back of his head with the ball. When he looked down, he noticed the rocks below were leaking red,

“Watchit, eh?” Little Brother threw back the ball and slipped down to see what it was. He had never seen a rock “bleed” before. But he touched the substance and it was grainy. Then he tasted it and he tasted of metal.

Oh sea, ooooh sea

*I do not see
the things you wish for me to see
the moon creates the waves
pushes and pulls
show the way
to this young fool
Oh sea, ooooh sea
you've given me the rust
I bless you for your trust.*

Little Brother put some of the rust in his jar. He held it to the sun and instantly the water was gone and all that was left was the red metallic powder. He showed his sister. "Little Sister! Lookit, I've got the rust of the bay!"

"Ti Frè, your journey has begun. But know, you'll be fine." She kissed his cheek and went back to her book. Little Sister was trying to learn the language of the serious men. She would look at their books, listen to them talk, and study them. Little Brother didn't understand why she was always in the books, but she smiled at him and said, "Papa gave you your journey and he gave me mine. They are not the same, Ti Frè, but they are equal." He put the jar under his cot and dozed off listening to the strange words coming from his sister's mouth.

After a while the words weren't strange anymore. They were all starting to understand to some degree or another. Wood would talk to Jay about "soccer" and "football". Mama and Little Sister would listen to the radio they were given. They struggled to get stations through the static but were able to get some news now and again about home. Little Sister studied the words she saw on her walks. She now knew what the US COAST GUARD was. She knew what McCalla Airfield was and she knew her Aunt Catheline was somewhere in Camp Bulkeley. She explained all of this to Little Brother. She taught him words like captain, lieutenant, soldier, seaman, airman and marine, but he still called them the serious faces.

On his walk back to the tent, the wind went chill and it started to rain hard. Little Brother stood under a tree waiting for the storm to pass. An old man, in a shack outside the base waved for him to come inside. “Ven, ven...hermanito, siéntate.” Little Brother did not understand the man’s words. He did not speak this language, but the old man spoke clearly in other ways. The old man wrapped Little Brother in a blanket. He went to his stove and poured some tea into a cup. He gave Little Brother the mug and told him to drink. The tea was warm and Little Brother stopped shivering, but it was bitter. The old man noticing Little Brother’s face took a piece of the tree from outside his door and stirred it in his cup. The tea was now sweet. The old man sat across from Little Brother, looking out the open window at the down pour outside. Little Brother had now felt an overwhelming peace wash over him while silently waiting out the storm in the shack with the old man. Before he knew it, Little Brother had drifted off into a beautiful dream of him swimming in the deep blue waters as a stingray.

When he awoke, the old man was smiling knowingly at him. He handed him a leaf from his sweet tree, “Tómalo. Lo necesitas, hemanito.” Little Brother thanked the old man and walked back toward the camp. When he looked back, the shack was gone and in its place was the shell of a sea turtle. Little Brother blinked, confused. Then he heard a whisper in the wind, “Tómalo. Lo necesitas, hemanito.” Little Brother picked up the shell and sang his song while running back to his tent.

Oh sea, ooooh sea

I do not see

the things you wish for me to see

the moon creates the waves

pushes and pulls

show the way

to this young fool

Oh sea, ooooh sea

you've given me the rust
I bless you for your trust
you've given me leaves of the sweet reed
I thank you for blessing me.

When he returned home, he told Mama, Little Sister and Wood about what happened to him in the storm.

It was not long after the storm that the family was moved to a new place by the "US COAST GUARD," Little Sister read to him the words on the ship said as they sailed to another place. Jay had told Wood they were going to a place called, "The State of Sunshine?" Little Brother asked, "What kind of name is that?"

"No, no," Wood said, shaking his head so vigorously the rest of his body moved too, "Sunshine state."

"Is it hot there?" Mama chimed in.

"Jay told us that it was really nice and that they have Mickey Mouse there."

"I don't want no mouse 'round me," Mama bristled. Wood shook again.

"Mama," he whined, "the cartoon. Not a real mouse."

"Oh," They laughed trying to quell the fear and sadness they were all feeling.

The Sunshine state was a lot like home but the barbed wire and wire fence that surrounded them made the state of sunshine seem like a very dark place to Little Brother. He couldn't see the ocean, like he could on the rock. His body felt the distance. He longed to glide through the cool currents, floating on them like a kite.

"Mama, I understand now what Papa meant about the land."

"The old snail doesn't understand the land or the sky. He is of the sea. I am a daughter of the mangroves. I know the land, the sky and the sea. And it's not the land that is strange. It's always been man's understanding of land."

"But Papa said..."

“Son, man’s greatest downfall is believing he is the only one who has the answers. Look to others to help you on your journey.”

It was night when Little Sister woke him. “Ti Frè, it is time for you to find the light.”

“What light, Ti sè, it is the hour of darkness, there is not even a star in the sky.”

“Light is always present; it is man that cannot always see.” Little Sister’s eyes changed when she said that. She handed him a satchel. “You must bring rust from the bay, leaves of the sweet reed and light from the place they call sunshine before you can come home again.”

“Ti sè, I cannot leave here and if I could where would I go?”

“I can see the path clearly; I will be your guide. Wood is strong, he will use his strength to aid you on this journey.”

“Will you come home to sea with me?”

“No, I am a daughter of the sea fowls. My place is in the skies above the sea.” Little Brother gathered his belongings and stuffed them in the satchel. “You will also need the shell given to you in offering.” Little Brother retrieved the shell and they met Wood who was standing by the fence. Little Brother could not believe he hadn’t noticed how much Wood had grown. He stood several inches over him and his shoulders, arms, legs and hands all seemed to bulge with root like veins shining with phosphorescence that Little Brother equated with the waters around the reef.

“Ti Frè, Ti sè.” Wood nodded at them and turned to the fence and proceeded to pull the wires apart until there was a hole wide enough for them to walk through with ease.

“This way.” Little Sister pointed to the west. Little Brother was sweating with fear and excitement. He longed for the sea. He could feel the same pull the waves did from the moon calling him back home. They walked for what seemed like for hours, but the sky was unchanged. It was pitch and the darkness seemed to get denser the further they walked. “We are here.” Little Sister said. She stopped and looked out into the darkness. Little Brother tried to see what she was looking at. He started to walk ahead of here as he was hearing noises from the darkness that he

had never heard. There was a loud buzzing and groaning echoing in his ears. Wood stopped him from stepping forward,

“She will come to us.”

“She?” There was a snapping of twigs and movement from grass. He looked out but still could not see. Wood knelt on the ground and smiled wide.

“Manman,” he said in a low joyful voice. “I have missed you.” Little Brother looked down ecstatic to see his Aunt Catheline after all this time. When he focused on Wood and the face that barely shown from the light in his root like veins. It was a massive snake with a blueish color with a rust colored chin and belly.

“Tati Catheline? Is that you?”

“Wi, Ti Frè. It is time for me to help you as you helped my son.” Wood mounted the large snake first, then Little Sister. Little Brother hesitated for a moment unsure of what may come. His sister held out her hand.

“The unknown is nothing to fear. The unknown is a gift, something from God to help you flourish.” He took her hand and climbed upon the snake. In the darkness, they moved swiftly through the land, there was tall grasses and water and mud everywhere. They rode in silence the whole way because the cries around them were too loud to speak over. Nothing seemed to sleep in this place. Slowly, Little Brother began to see glowing eyes and the green of the water streams.

“Wow,” Little Brother exclaimed. “This is amazing.” Aunt Catheline stopped and coiled her body as they all dismounted.

“I wish you well on your journey, Ti Frè. I have no doubt you will succeed. The gods of Earth have given you good guides.” She bowed to him, smiled at Wood who held her snout close. After a moment, she slithered away. Wood marched forward through the marshes with Little Sister telling him the way. Little Brother, at first, struggled to keep up with them but soon he could smell the salt of the sea getting stronger and his legs had new life. Wood and Little

Sister stopped and soon Little Brother was engulfed by light. The sea and the sun washed over him. Behind him in the shadow of the marshes, Wood and Little Sister watched.

“Are you not coming?”

“This is your path. We have our own journey.”

“I hope to be able to help guide you both when the time comes.” They smiled and walked back into the darkness.

Little Brother sat on the small patch of land surrounded by the bright blue waters and the white light of the sun. He placed the turtle shell in his lap. Tore the leaf from the sweet reed and placed them into the shell. He then poured the rust in the shell. Nothing happened. Little Brother was confused and waited. And he waited. Frustrated, he closed his eyes and listened to the sea.

“The sea!” He reached his hand in the water and pulled up a glowing coral. He started to sing his song.

Oh sea, ooooh sea

I did not see

the things you wished me to see

the moon creates the waves

pushes and pulls

showed the way

to this young fool

Oh sea, ooooh sea

you've given me the rust

I bless you for your trust

you've given me leaves of the sweet reed

I thank you for blessing me

You've given me light

Oh sea, ooooh sea

How you've blessed my life.

He placed in the shell and offered his findings back to the sea. The turtle shell drifted out with the current and then the waters began churning in front of him. He heard singing voices calling to him,

“Byenvini nan kay la, Ti Frè. Welcome home.”

Fitz blinked clearly processing the end of the story. “Daddy?”

“Yes, son.”

“I’m glad you didn’t make conch fritters today.” His father doubled over in laughter.

“Many times, your Nann would tell us that story while making fritters. ‘Til this day your uncle refuses to eat them.”

God, Time and the Little Queen of Vision Colony

The kids always had a hard time going to sleep after their parents went back to the city for the week. It wasn't that they didn't love their grandparents, they just hated watching their mother and father leave for the week. Vaughn often cried and Naima usually insisted on sleeping with her little brother those nights. Naima would often wash her little brother's face and put him in her room. Normally, Naima didn't let either boy anywhere near her bedroom, but on Sunday nights it was different. "I just do it so he feels better," she would say.

"Yeah right, you do it because it makes *you* feel better," Fitz would tease. Granny would make them all settle down. Naima had a night light that looked like stars. Fitz would lay across the foot of the bed while the two younger siblings would snuggle under the blanket at the head. Their grandmother would sit in a rocker in front of them. Her face was dimly lit by the light creeping in from the hall through the cracked door. They could hear their grandfather snoring in the living room while the late game played on the radio.

"This light makes me think about Time. He had a watch that showed the stars moving in the sky. You see, Time was at his core a romantic. God had delighted in the nature of his friend to be all at once an enthusiast, student and connoisseur of the very thing he had dominion. Time had a different watch for every second of the day. Devices that ranged from ornate replicas of constellations and significant moments in history to simplistic shadows mimicking the dance of the sun. But his favorite watch was one that was inspired by a story that God had told him about the ants of the Vision colony and their little queen below. The watch displayed scenes from the story of the tiny ant queen."

Time had adored this story and often asked God to retell the tale and adventures of the small ant. It intrigued him how the ants understood so little about time, nothing beyond the shadows and lights but alas had found ways to utilize every short moment they had and hold it with grand appreciation that paralleled his own.

“My friend, you have heard this story over and over. I am positive you could tell it is well as I do now,” God said out of respect to custom. He was an eager storyteller and was quite proud of his creations.

“Please indulge me again, God.” Smiling at the pleading, childlike eyes Time possessed despite his vast and infinite nature. God began the tale:

The Sky Colony was the pride of ant kingdom. The Sky Colony was huge and seemed to the ants of ant kingdom to reach above the clouds. The colony was so vast that there were three queens to that shared dominion: Queen Emeritus, Sage Grace and Grand Ambition. Emeritus adored the little ambitious ant and ensured that she had some real responsibility in the colony despite Sage Grace’s constant need to do things her own way.

To Grand Ambition it seemed that the way of the Sky Colony, while amazing and beautiful, could be better. She had a vision but knew that she needed to explore the world before offering any new ideas to her mother. Sage Grace was familiar and often frustrated with her daughter’s curiosity and rejection of tradition. She had already warned Grand Ambition that she did not approve of the mission and would rather the young noble would do things the way they had always been done. Queen Emeritus, however, remembered her own path to becoming a beloved queen and granted the small ant’s request.

Grand Ambition started her mission to find new ways to improve Sky Colony. The Emeritus told her workers to travel with her granddaughter on her journey so, that she would not be alone. The small army of ants searched the forest and talked to wood ants. Walked through the desert and talked to fire ants. Climbed the tall branches and met the flying ants. When the crusade reached the great river, she sent the troops back to the Sky Colony, “This is now your mission. Gather food on your way back. Deliver it to the Queen Emeritus and Sage Grace. Tell them of our journey and tell them that some roads must be travelled alone. I shall return when I have found what I am searching for.”

Grand Ambition of Sky Colony walked along the banks until she saw Crane and Croc, the wisest of all creatures. The little ant bowed and asked that they guide her. Crane and Croc spoke in unison, "You first must see."

"But I have traveled far, and I have seen, the wood ant, the fire ant, the flying ant! What more must I learn?"

"You have not yet seen," they said. Crane and Croc placed a scaly feather in front of the small ant. She touched it and became an eye. First, she was an eye of an earthworm, then she was the eye of a giraffe, she was the eye of a whale shark and the eye of a squirrel. She was the eye of creatures from the water, land, and sky. And she had seen.

When Grand Ambition returned to the Sky Colony things were different. The Queen Emeritus was ill, and Sage Grace was angry. The smallest noble told of her lessons from Crane and Croc and vowed to help her mother make the Sky Colony stronger and better. Her grandmother glowed with pride and confidence that her legacy would be maintained as well as strengthen under the leadership of the two younger queens. And then, Queen Emeritus became earth.

Sage Grace was even angrier now and did not want to listen to anyone, but especially, not the small queen's radical plans for the colony. "The old ways are good ways! There is no need to change. I am in charge now and you are to do as I say." Grand Ambition tried to do as her mother ordered but there was dissention in the colony now. There were ants who trusted the old ways and followed her mother fiercely. There were ants who believed in the ambitions of the small ant queen and wanted to be from under the rule of Sage Grace,

"Your eminence, we have heard of your adventures and we want to know as you know. Sage Grace only knows the ways of the ant but you, you have seen, and we follow you."

It was dangerous for them to speak this way, for she knew Sage Grace's workers were always around. The next day Grand Ambition laid her crown at her mother's feet and said, "I must go."

“You would leave your destiny, your family, your home? You disgrace the memory of the Queen Emeritus and you have turned your back on me. You are banished from Sky Colony! Go.” The determined little ant nodded sadly, but pridefully accepted the consequences of her choices. She knew that her mother had not walked her path and had not been given the vision that Crane and Croc had bestowed upon her.

“If that is the way you want it to be, I shall respect it,” Grand Ambition knew that her mother’s refusal to change did not excuse her from fulfilling her destiny. She and her followers left knowing that this was just the beginning for them. In time, Grand Ambition and those helper ants established a new colony in the ant kingdom. The Vision Colony was small but growing. It was a marvel across the land. It was indeed a queer looking structure; the ants there seemed to understand all things and used all things to build a strong colony. They also worked with other colonies and other creatures alike. The ants in the kingdom often talked about Vision Colony’s queen, who had been fish, birds and cattle, who had given up her station and stepped out on her own path. Thus, a new era began.

Time began the usual questions. Not out of lack of understanding but to challenge God to give the little creatures more than He had, “Why do you only give ants such little time? They above all other creatures utilize what they have been given more efficiently and effectively. Whereas your humans show an abundance of waste.”

“Time, why do you not see that I have given the ant an abundance. Does your infiniteness give you more appreciation?”

“No, but the ant is more deserving than the whale, the tortoise or man.”

“Would you like to be an ant, Time?”

Time sat and pondered the notion for some millennia (sheer moments in the infinite experience of the two friends). Time, with a smile that was broad and bright as the firmament said, “What a wonderful story that would be!”

By the time Pappy woke up to check on them, all three children were fast asleep at peace with the world. The next morning when their grandparents went to wake them for breakfast, they saw that the younger two had barely moved during the night, but Fitz had somehow ended up under the covers next to them.

Byrd in Flight

Pappy's favorite thing to do was to sit on the porch. You could often find him out fiddling with car parts, smoking meat, shining shoes, listening to the radio or just sitting outside, "Just enjoyin the fruits of God's labor," he'd say. Fitz was sitting with his grandfather listening to the baseball game and playing fetch with Scratch. The porch light was on, but it was dark where the ball was landing. Scratch would seem to disappear and reappear like magic. On about the fifth throw Fitz heard Scratch growling and barking at something. Pappy turned off the radio and listened.

"Sounds like a possum," Pappy stood up lookin' out toward the sound. "Scratch! Come back here!" He stepped down grabbing the digging fork that was leaning against the house near the garden. "Scratch!" Fitz, went in the house to get the big flashlight but by the time he got back, Scratch and Pappy were sitting on the bottom steps.

"What happened?" Fitz said pointing the flashlight trying to see what was out there. Pappy was petting Scratch who was panting.

"Scratch was telling that old possum to get on from here. Huh, boy?"

"The possum gone?" Fitz started to step out to see if he could see it. Pappy caught the back of his pants and pulled him back.

"Don't go out there messin' with possums. I don't want you taking chances and getting bit. You hear me?" Fitz turned off the light and sat on the other side of Scratch. They sat there for a while just listening to wind and Scratch panting when Pappy started talking, "The weather was sweet just like this. The sky was pitch and there was a misty cool breeze kissing Byrd's feathers. He had always loved the comfort of a cool summer night after the crushing heat under the summer sun. Byrd was high above the trees, on life and on the awe inducing beauty around him. He knew the gospel of the Lord Father but had been tempted from time to time by the call of the Lord Father's dark son. Byrd sang a melody of joy, suffering, despair and hope, he sang of love of loss, of God above and the Devil Below."

Not everyone in the land appreciated Byrd's song. His scating and chirping at all hours ruffled many feathers, scared many a cat, raised the whiskers on all manner of creature within earshot of what they deemed his caterwauling. But no one took it much to heart because they knew Byrd. They knew who he was and there wasn't any ill intent behind his waking them at all hours of the night. Byrd was just another neighbor in a place full of brethren of all sorts. This was home to them all, an identity ingrained in them all, a blessing from the Lord Father and Byrd was one among them.

Byrd sat on the edge of the Grand Tree drumming his dew-glistening, ebony wings. The water that had gathered on his body begin to sprinkle on the grass below.

"Hey, whatcha doin' up there, Byrd?" Possum called below in between his bites of discarded scraps of trash.

"Restin', I'm mighty tired. Been singing and flyin' for hours."

"I can take you home, Byrd. That way you can rest and get home safely to your family."

"That's plenty kind of ya, Possum. But I don't wantcha goin' out ya way for me."

"It's fine, I'm headin' that way myself. Takin' you home is the neighborly thing to do. As the Lord Father says."

"He does say that..." Byrd thought for a moment. He hadn't really known Possum well enough to put him out, but they shared good mornin', good evenin', how's yo ma, how's yo pa many a time. There had never been any trouble between them. Possum brushed his matted fur.

"You comin'?" Byrd floated down to Possum's back and they were off.

Byrd didn't know the path Possum was travelling, but he also wasn't very familiar with the land. He was a creature of the sky. He was used to the freedom and views of the sky. While his vision was excellent, it never concerned him to understand things that were not of his nature. He was even less concerned about the way travelled as his body became heavy with sleep.

When Possum realized that Byrd had dozed, he quickly ran to the brush where Rat and Snake were waiting. "Ooowee! I can't believe you caught one of 'em, Possum!"

“Shhh you’ll wake him and I’m sholl hungry,” Possum whispered.

“We’ssssss not gunna eat this feller,” Snake slithered around Possum closely watching the sleeping raven.

“Whatchu mean, Snake? Why not? We all hungry,” Rat rubbed his paws together.

“That there is vermin. That’s a raven. You know how no good ravens is?”

“Snake, whatchu talkin’ bout?”

“Ravens is black as soot and death. The Lord Father couldn’t have nuthin’ to do with no creature as such. They’s of Morning Star. Here to trick us, take our souls, they’s uppity, thinkin’ they’s better than us cause the can fly. But nothin’s foolin’ us, this is a creature of Hell.” Rat and Possum looked at each other confused at first, but as Snake kept explaining things the more, they saw Byrd’s darkness as poison. They saw the sleeping bird as vile, ugly and something unworthy of friendship, kindness or even to fill their empty bellies. Byrd was the root of all the world’s problems and needed to be destroyed.

The night sky cloaked them as Rat and Possum began to attack him. Snake squeezed him tight within his coiled scaled body. Snake squeezed him so tight that Byrd couldn’t cry out. Byrd couldn’t sing to Lord Father, couldn’t cry out to the birds in or around the Grand Tree. Byrd began to beg with his eyes for Rat, Possum and Snake to let him go. But they paid him no mind. Possum and Rat began to pluck Byrd’s feathers and right before the low-down Snake bit him with a poisonous bite, Byrd prayed to the Lord Father.

The air was sweet. Byrd could no longer feel pain. He no longer remembered his song of suffering, despair, of loss, or the Devil Below. All he had was peace and joy. Overwhelming joy.

The Lord Father gathered the small Byrd and held him close to His breast. Byrd closed his eyes and breathed in the light, the joy, the beauty, the peace that surrounded him and he felt completely anew. When his eyes opened Byrd, he was covered in feathers of many colors. The deepest reds, greens, blues, golds, purples and more. Byrd felt as beautiful inside as he did outside. Byrd began to sing.

Under the Grand Tree the three pests placed Byrd's broken body and feathers on the shady side of the trunk just before the sun rose. As the sun was rising but the cool of the night still hung in the air the Prairie Dog and Squirrel began their day scrounging for food. The sight of the broken Byrd caught their attention.

"Is that Byrd?"

"Can't be! He was hootin' and hollerin' just last night."

"I heard him too but that sho looks like him, best I can tell." The two began to chirp and chitter to wake every creature near or far to the Grand Tree. The deer and elk, the worms and ants, the birds and bats, the raccoons and armadillos, the bears and bobcats, the ferrets and the mice and on and on the came to gaze upon the ruin before them. Horror befell the animals, then outrage and shame. They couldn't believe that one among them could have done such a thing.

Owl screeched, "Where's Possum, Snake and Rat?"

"They was talkin' to Byrd last night," howled Wolf. Bear and Bobcat followed the trail of black feathers that led to the stream and there was no sign of Possum, Rat or Snake.

"They were here," Bobcat said sniffing the dirt, "but I cannot tell where they went." It was as if the waters had known what terrible thing they had done, swallowed them whole and delivered them to the Devil soaked to the bones by water and sin. Even the tortoise and the owl could not explain what had happened to them. And no one ever saw hide nor hair from Possum, Rat or Snake again. It wasn't long before they were all forgotten. But the animals of the Grand Tree remembered Byrd. They would sing along as the wind often whistled his songs through the leaves of the Grand Tree.

The screen door opened. Pappy, Fitz and Scratched looked back to see who it was. Granny looked at them curiously, "What ya'll doing out here?"

"We just listening to the wind and enjoyin' the fruits of God's labor," Fitz said with a tooth-filled grin.

The Legend of Parish Saint

By the time they got to Nann's house it was almost dinner time. The kids tumbled out of the car, clamoring to be the first to the door. There was such a ruckus from the three siblings that their grandmother opened the door to see what happened, "What in the world?" Ruby embarrassed by their behavior simply glared at them momentarily before they became quiet.

"Unpack the car," Justé told them as her grabbed several bags and made his way to hug his mother. "It smells good in here; you did not have to cook!" His mother pushed him out of the way,

"Shush up! You all came all this way and thought I wasn't going to feed you?" She reached out to hug and kiss his wife who was following behind with some bags of her own. They kissed each other's cheeks.

"Lise, I'll help soon as I get them all sorted," Nann shook her head at Ruby.

"Nonsense, nothing to help with. You just get settled and relax." Before she could close the door, Father Curtis was walking up. "Father, right on time!" She looked at his basket and tilted her head to the side, "You didn't." He smiled, stepping up to the porch,

"I did. And I went a little crazy this week. There are croissants, a lovely sourdough, a variety of bread sticks and some corn bread." They hugged as she took the basket.

"I'm sure you're the cause of many of prayers of thanks throughout the order," he chuckled as they walked through to the kitchen.

"Probably, they are happy I'm finally making bread that's edible." He sat down at the table. She gently popped his shoulder.

"More than edible, delicious," She began placing the corn bread in a bowl. The kids ran out to the kitchen and stopped abruptly when they saw the guest.

"Oh, I am so excited to meet you guys finally, all Lise does besides beating me in baking competitions is tell stories about you," He stood up and offered his hand to this kids, "Nice to

meet you Fitz,” he said reaching for the oldest child’s hand, shaking it then turning to, “Naima,” then seriously reaching to, “Mr. Vaughn. I am...”

“Father Curtis!” Their father interjected excitedly as he walked into the kitchen and hugged the older man, “Guys, this is one of my old teachers.”

“Old indeed,” the man sat in his seat.

“What did you teach daddy?” Fitz asked sitting across from the priest.

“Music.”

“And poker, if the stories are true,” Ruby reached for the priest’s hand.

“Ah, you saint of a woman. To deal with this fool, Justé Bien-Aime, and his brood,” he laughed heartily. Justé laughed too.

“Would you please repeat that to my mother, she swears they get it from me,” She smiled, “It is so nice to finally meet you, Father Curtis.”

“You say that now, wait until he gets started on his stories,” Nann said from the stove. Father Curtis waved her off,

“She loves my stories!”

“Mama said you had started baking.”

The Priest nodded, “It started when the Sermon on the Mount Baptist Church was burned down. I wanted to make sure they could still have the sacrament. Pastor Redding thanked me but asked that I find some other way to support his flock,” he guffawed. “Thank goodness your mother took mercy on me and taught me a thing or two. She won’t tell me everything, though.”

“That one is competitive, Father Curtis,” Justé got up to help his mother finish dinner.

“Oh, I know but one day with the Lord’s favor I shall defeat her one day.”

“Devine intervention is the only way you’ll ever beat me,” Nann laughed.

“We saw a burnt church on the way in,” Ruby said getting drinks for the family.

“That’s another church, I’m afraid,” They all sat quietly for a while.

“Why are the churches burning?” Fitz finally asked.

“Well baby, there isn’t a good reason any way you explain it,” ‘Lise said stepping from the over to rub her grandson’s head.

“Your grandmother and I have fierce debates about this. She’s trying to spare you.”

“Debates? I’ve never seen two people fuss and fight so much and spend so much time together that weren’t married,” Justé said setting the table.” His mother smacked him upside the head.

“We have good fun, huh ‘Lise?”

“Sure do!”

“Kids let me tell you about one of the churches. Your Nann and I will have to take you there. It’s where a miracle happened. Happened long before I moved here, but us men of God talk. They said it was a miracle. A clear sign from God. The child was a gift from Heaven. Surely, he was one of God’s anointed. That the small child’s presence was evidence of God’s love and mercy. It was nothing, short of a miracle. They were blessed to have witnessed it.”

They said he was found sleeping peacefully on the altar. That the firefighters brought the child out unscathed and undisturbed by the devastation and chaos surrounding him. That the church was practically demolished by the fire. The structure had crumbled around the altar where the baby was sleeping. The entire structure was devastated except where the infant boy was found. “Can I get an Amen?” The pastor cried out partly in pain and partly in awe.

“Amen!”

“Amen! Amen Amen!”

“Amen! Aaaamen!”

The mothers of the church stood in the center of the ashen rubble waiving their hands and handkerchiefs in the air. Resonance from their humming, singing and audible prayers felt like a warm blanket on the child. The pastor held him tight in his arms as the church mothers’ prayer group continued to speak supplications over the tiny boy.

They said he was christened with the water from the smoke-stained stoup. As the gray drops of water (a mix of holy and municipal from the firefighters' hose) ran down his face, they named the abandoned infant Parish Saint. No one knew where the boy had come from, there wasn't a note. But it was clear to those there that day that someone had abandoned the child.

They say that God pitied the abandoned infant and refused to let him be both abandoned and burned alive in one day. They were all familiar with these type of attacks in this part of the South. There had been two other fires just like it a few weeks ago at other black churches. Tabernacle Zion AME was the latest victim in a string of church burnings that had occurred in Louisiana that Spring.

They said that when the sheriff of the town gazed into the innocent child's eyes, he was moved to take quick action. When the evidence implicated the sheriff's own son, memories of the smiling boy, baptized in holy and smoky water had such a hold on him that he turned in his youngest son for the crime without hesitation. The sheriff's own son was so affected by a picture the prosecution used of the baby being brought out of the devastated sanctuary, that he argued that the 30 years sentence he was given was too lenient.

They said that Parish Saint never cried as a baby. That the boy was either joyful or sleep. He was adopted by Deaconess Bethea and her husband a high school history teacher everyone called Teacherman. The Deaconess and Teacherman could not have children. They said after the anointed child joined their family, abundance came to them. They had three more children after Parish came to their home but there was no distinction in the way they loved him or their natural children. They said Parish Saint was a miracle that begot the other miracles that followed.

They said that when Parish Saint was old enough to speak, he could often be seen talking to someone that wasn't there. When asked who he was speaking to he would often look quizzically at the inquirer as if the answer was obvious and flatly responded, "Emmanuel". Parish Saint was active in the ministry by way of music. While he was still in diapers, he could be seen standing next to his father (a soloist in the Tenors for the Tabernacle choir) playing the

tambourine in an un-syncopated rhythm. They say once he was tall enough to reach the peddles Parish could play the organ so well that he would elicit such huge contributions from the congregation that the church was not only able to pay off repairs not covered by the insurance company, but they built a new educational center and fully stocked their food bank.

They say that even on the most segregated day in America (Sunday) word of Parish Saints music and his miraculous story had brought in people from not only the white side of town, but people from different states and even countries. Deaconess and Teacherman beamed with pride about their eldest child, but The Lord beamed brighter. They say Parish Saint gave God so much pride that light constantly shined on him. It didn't matter if it was a cloudy day or if the skies stirred in storm and rain, or if it was night The Lord's love and light shone on him.

They say by the time Parish Saint was a man the once divide Louisiana township marked by a history of hate and violence had become a beacon of brotherhood and love. People of the town accepted each other, looked out for their neighbors, they fellowshiped together and broke bread together. There was no longer a mere acceptance of another's existence there was a real recognition and appreciation of the God in every man, woman and child. They say that the real miracle of Parish Saint was that he was able to bring a reckoning of all the injustices. That he was able to be a mirror for everyone who had reduced another to their color, faith, where they came from, or who they loved instead of acknowledging they too were a child of God. They say Parish Saint's real legacy was that he was able to open the eyes of those blinded by hate or ignorance and allowed them to see the gifts God bestowed to everyone.

They say when Parish Saint left home the light followed him wherever he went. So many across the land had hardened their hearts to their brothers and sisters. Parish Saint knew how to thaw the cooled hearts and minds of those captivated by the Devil's song of scapegoating and otherizing. They say when Parish Saint sat down at the organ or keyboard, he exalted the Lord. Those that heard the young man sing out cry out in song felt possessed by The Spirit and were forever changed. They said Parish Saint was an instrument of The Lord.

“You used to tell us that story when we used to play for church. ‘Be an instrument of the Lord!’ You used to say that all the time,” Their dad smiled.

“Brother Self says, ‘Let Him use you!’” Vaughn mimicked his friend perfectly. They all laughed.

“Did that really happen?” Fitz asked the priest who shrugged.

“Well, I don’t have proof. I don’t know for certain. Never met none of those folks. But I believe it really did. That’s what faith is.”

“Curtis, bless the food for us before it gets cold,” Nann said grabbing his and Ruby’s hands as she bowed her head.

Sistah Stitch Makes a Quilt for The Lord

Nann took Ruby and Naima to an art exhibit. “You know I’m in a women’s group,” Nann said excited, “We make most of our money for our scholarships for orphaned children through selling quilts.”

“Yeah, I bought one for mama and daddy,” Ruby said as they walked in the building, “They love it.”

“Well, our founder is being honored through this exhibit. I know Naima loves art and I thought she’d might like to see how quilts can be art too.” Naima scrunched her face up at her grandmother,

“Like blankets?”

“Yep, but these aren’t just ordinary blankets, I promise.” When they walked in there was a small crowd gathered in the center of the gallery. The gallery was a small shot gun house that had been gutted and stripped to its bare walls to allow the art to stand out. In the center of the crowd was an older gentleman who was speaking.

“Addyson was born to Addy Mae and Harper Freedman in Texas. The year was 1878 a mere thirteen years after Juneteenth. My grandmother was the ninth of sixteen children. Being part of such a large family, Addyson Mable Freedman learned quickly how to make her own way. By the time she was twelve years old Addy had become a well-known seamstress and quiltmaker in the county. People from all around came to get dresses, shirts, suits and quilts created by my grandmother. It got to the point that black folks walking home from church in their Sunday’s best were catching the eyes of the white people in town. Once they learned the clothes were made by a poor little negro girl on the other side of the tracks, white women convinced their husbands to set Sistah Stitch, as she came to be called, up with a shop of her own.”

“Sistah Stitch worked for twenty-five years in that first shop. She saved her money and took on more and more jobs. Eventually, she saved up enough to buy her own home with a shop

attached. The home she bought was in the black side of town, but that didn't deter her white patrons none. In that home she not only built a business, but she raised a family with her husband Elijah Pettaway. They had four children, two boys and two girls: Baptiste, Baxter, Billie and Bellamy. In that following decade Sistah Stitch expanded her business and had trained several young black girls to be seamstresses like her including her youngest daughter Bellemy who eventually took over the business. Her training, hiring of young black girls, buying fabric, dye and other sewing equipment from black vendors made it possible for many in the community to create as well as build wealth."

Naima began to get restless listening to the man drone on about his grandmother's life. So, she wandered off to look at the quilts. She felt herself drawn to one. One that seemed to tell a story about God and scales. Nann stood behind her, "This one is my favorite too. Sister Pettaway told us the story behind it." Naima turned to face her grandmother who sat in front of the quilt cross legged. Naima sat in front of her attentive. "Sister Pettaway said after her mother died, she would often come visit her in her sleep. She said they would talk for hours about all kinds of things. But sometimes her mother, Addyson, would tell her about God and Heaven. Sister Pettaway told us that her mother said most of these preachers got God all wrong."

Addyson was on her way to an afterlife. She hoped she had done enough good to see Heaven, but Addyson was no fool. But she started walking anyways and she saw people she knew from her past, they seemed to be watching her path to help guide her on her way.

"Sistah," her husband, Elijah, called. "Sista, I've been lookin for ya!"

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting, Eli." He shook his head and pulled her close.

"Wasn't your time, Sistah." He took her hand and led her to a golden door. "They'll have your name in the ledger."

"St. Michael?" Elijah shook his head again and smiled. "He'll be there to greet ya."

"Whatchu mean, He?"

"You know who I mean. The man Himself."

“Can’t be. Why would he waste his time on me? I ain’t nobody much.” Elijah.”

“That’s just it Sistah. You *is* somebody and not just to me.” He kissed the inside of her hand and opened the door. The room was lit with the rays of a rising sun. It was the time of day Mrs. Pettaway woke to appreciate the Lord’s works and pray. A resolute feeling of peace and love filled her. Or rather took up all the space, there was no room for worry, sadness or anger. He sat at a nursing a hot cup of black coffee with a kick of cane rum from, her neighbor, Old Fella’s barrels. He motioned for her to sit across from him. As she eased into the comfortable seat that felt exactly like her father’s lap. He pushed the hot drink to her.

“You know how to make a lady feel welcome,” she said before sipping the familiar beverage. He smiled warmly that resembled the smile of all of her children simultaneously.

“You are welcome.”

“To be honest, I surprised to be here in Your presence, Lord.”

“Oh, why is that?”

“I guess I never thought myself worthy.” He squinted processing her words.

“Why not? You did a lot of good. You were one of my most faithful.”

“Well Lord, as they say, You move in mysterious ways.” He leaned in, curious.

“Which of my so-called ways were most mysterious to you?” She sat and thought about it for a while, letting the warmth of the beverage soothe her.

“Well Lord, why you didn’t make us white?”

“Why you want to be white?”

“Well, you made white folks in your image. Why you didn’t make us all white? That way, we can all be equal.” He suspired and stood up from the table.

“Follow Me,” as Sistah Stitch stood the room changed. She did not remember walking or the path they took. When she gathered herself, she saw a room that resembled her favorite fishing spot but instead of a river full of fish, there was a huge golden scale. “You see that scale,

Sistah?" She nodded. "Go, stand on the right side." She obeyed him. He stood on the left and He of course was valued as more.

"Well, I knew that Lord. You is the Lord and You is also white."

"Am I? Did you really look on Me?" Sistah looked at the Lord and realized he was simultaneously without color and every color. The Lord stepped off the scale and he lined up the white folks she knew and some white folks she didn't know. As each one stepped on the scale there was no difference. There was no tipping one way or the other. By the time a dozen white men and women had stepped on and off the left scale Addyson Pettaway began to cry.

"All this time, Lord. I didn't know. So, many don't know."

"Only the Devil could create such a belief in man. Lucifer wants you all to believe you are not worthy."

"Lord, on Earth you have white folks that think they's better than black. You got men that think they's better than women."

"Lucifer spreads those lies on Earth. Many wars, many injustices have been done in the misguided attempt to honor Me. Their actions have been corrupted by the slanderer who misrepresents Me." They were back at the table and her mug was refilled with a fresh hot cup of her drink.

"I'm sorry, Lord. I should have had more faith. I should've known You wouldn't do that sort of thing."

"I do not fault you. I do not fault any of you," He patted her hand. "I know this is a lot to process. How about I give you time to settle and let's talk another time?" Sistah Stitch was back in her workshop. Her husband was there smiling.

"I figured I'd find you here," She looked up at him. You know there folks down there that don't even believe we deserve equal rights still. He nodded. "No, Elijah, I mean negroes like me. They don't see it."

"It's a lot of folks who don't see the way God sees. He's God," Elijah shrugged.

“But this lie. This lie, it’s an evil poison. Folks been fed and keep feedin’ themselves.”

“Whatchu gon do about it?” She looked up at her husband. Standing straight and proud as the day she married him. He had not the weariness of time but the comfort of it.”

“What can I do? I’m dead now.”

“Well, that’s true, but you’re in the presence of the Almighty.” She smiled and got to work.

She worked for a long time. She couldn’t tell for how long because in Heaven time did not work the same as it did on Earth. But when she was done, she had sewn a quilt. A quilt unlike every other quilt she had made. This quilt told a story of the poison of the Devil’s lies. It showed how the Devil’s lies had been the cause of all destruction and pain. It showed the Devil’s mocking man for his folly. It showed a sadden God that His creations had been deceived. The quilt was sewn with such craftsmanship, such love and faith that the fabric of the quilt would move to depict the treachery of the Devil and the consequences through history on one side. On the other the mercy and grace of the Lord was revealed on the other.

The room was lit with the rays of a rising sun, just as it was before. He sat at the table again handing her another piping hot cup of black coffee and Old Fella’s cane rum. “You’ve been busy, I see.”

She nodded, “I reckon I don’t gotta show it to you.”

He chuckled, “You don’t gotta, but if it’s all the same...” God looked upon her quilt and was pleased.

“Lord, I know it’s a lot to ask but I got to find a way to get this to people in the land of the living.” The Lord nodded and the quilt disappeared.

“I sent it where it would do the most good.” Sistah Stitch and the Lord sat satisfied with all they had done and enjoyed the beauty of the day.

“Mama, I’m hungry,” the youngest of Billie’s grandchildren called Patch cried out in the sanctuary. The older folks laughed.

“Well, the little one has spoke a word. We will be meeting at the Pettaway family home for the repass.” As the family settled and relaxed after eating. The little ones became tired. Patch went upstairs to find a blanket to wrap herself in for a nap. She found a lovely quilt that showed stories. She ran downstairs to find her grandmother to lay in her lap. As she laid her head on her granny’s lap and pulled the blanket around her shoulders someone said,

“Patch, where you find that blanket?” Patch opened her eyes.

“In SistaH Stitch closet.” Bellamy looked at the quilt and immediately recognized her mother’s stitches.

“It’s her’s alright, but I never seen this one. This is beyond anything I’ve ever seen.” As they looked on the quilt, they all began to understand. Understand the lies. But most importantly, they understood their worth. The love the Lord had for them.

Soon they shared the lessons from the quilt with their neighbors, the community leaders, the preachers, to everyone they could. Pretty soon, word got out about the storytelling quilt made by Sistah Stitch. Folks came from all around to see the stories of the Devil’s lies. And the story of God’s love for us all. The quilt and the story became famous. It became a treasure artifact for the world to see.

When Nann had finished the story, she noticed a small crowd had gathered around her and Naima. The older man wiped his face with his handkerchief, “You sound just like my mother,” he said.

“Bellamy told us that story many times,” She stood to shake the man’s hand, “She was a wonderful woman.”

“When she told me that story, I felt like it was true,”

Naima tilted her head at the man, “You don’t believe it?”

The man blinked at her, “I want to,” he said sincerely.

“Then you should,” Naima turned back to the quilt. Nann reached for the man’s hand and held it, “Your mother used to say, ‘Man couldn’t have made up something this beautiful,’ and

Sistah Stitch told her during their talks, ‘We accept that the truth is often harsh and ugly and so when it shows out as altogether different, we don’t know how to respond.’”

The Fog of Sapphire Lake

They were back on the porch. The kids and their father had spent the day fishing and Pappy was cleaning the fish while heating up the grease outside. Granny was shucking corn with Ruby who had been upset since getting back from the city the night before. "I'm so glad Justé found a job near here."

"I thought you wanted to be out there in the city for the kids," her mother asked.

"I see the benefits but, I also see the struggles. Being out here keeps them from that just a little while longer." The kids and Scratch were playing in the yard. The sun was going down and there was a nice breeze that was refreshing after a sunny day. "Guys come drink some water and cool down," Ruby said. "You know, it's just hard."

"Your mama struggled too when she first started working," Pappy was seasoning the fish and coating it in cornmeal. Justé was bringing out the diced potatoes and placing them slowly into the oil. Granny snapped around to look at him,

"You remember that?"

He nodded slowly, "Sure do. You used to come home crying about how those folks talked to you. You'd be steaming. That's when we started the general store."

"Mama, I don't remember you working anywhere but at the store or the church."

"I guess you put all that out of your mind. I don't blame you; I try to forget it too. Your mama was something crazy coming home," Pappy said giggling and hugging his wife who was stone faced. Granny looked at Ruby who was still clearly frustrated but tending to her children.

"While I was working, I just realized we live in two very different worlds. I was fortunate to have an older sista, Mrs. Willis, who helped me. We were the only two black women accountants in that entire firm."

"What she do mama?" Ruby was rubbing Scratch.

"She just told me the truth, that they weren't going to see me."

"What does that mean," Ruby asked.

“I asked her the same thing,” Granny giggled, “She told me this story her mother told her.”

“Something about some fog,” Pappy said lowering the fish in the grease.

“That’s right. He told her she ought not go to that town. She and Jackson were talking on his daddy’s old shrimp boat. ‘Ezilí,’ he said ‘there’s somethin’ wrong with that town.’”

“Where you hear that?”

“Round. It shouldn’t matter none if it’s true.”

“Dependin’ who was doing the tellin’. If it’s one of your silly friends, ain’t a lick a truth in what they say.” Ezilí laughed.

“You ain’t ever heard the song, chère? The one they sang out there on the boats.”

“You the shrimp man, not me.” Jackson turned to look at the calm waters of the gulf and sang her the tune.

“Sapphire sapphire vicious blue
Tints the lens
Distorts the light within you
Sapphire sapphire contemptuous blue
Clouds all truth
Make a monster of you
Sapphire sapphire malicious blue
Eclipses the sun
Changes the way they see you
Sapphire sapphire discreditin’ blue
Mutes all that’s said
Justifies not listenin’ to you
Sapphire sapphire cripplin’ blue
Obscures the stars

Turn your kin 'gainst you.”

“You think Imma go off somewhere and change into some kind of monster on you?”

“You already a monster, leavin me...” he smiled on the side of his mouth. She reached up and looked squarely into his penny-colored eyes.

“Know I’ll be workin mighty hard to get back home fast. So’s I can hurry up and make an honest man out of you, Jackson Mingo.” He bent down and kissed her.

They told her not to go to that town. Her daddy and brothers sat sniffing with damp cheeks and her mama was standing at the stove, solid as the rock she was. “I don’t like this not one bit,” her daddy said.

“Daddy! You promised you wouldn’t fuss none.”

“I did. I did. But I thought that boy of yours would’ve talked some sense into you.” Ezilí broke from her father’s grasp and stood looking at him with hands on her hips.

“It was you told Jackson all them lies about the fog from Sapphire Lake.”

“I ain’t lie to that boy! Them stories true. I heard them from old Willis Queen that his first wife never returned from that town. When he went to go search for her, folks was running from the place talkin’ ‘bout a monster. That lady ain’t been seent since!”

“What kinda man did I marry that listen to the tales of a crazy drunk?” Mama handed her a satchel of food.

“Mama, it’s true, tho! Ya’ll ain’t ever hear that song ‘bout the lake?” Her brother Buzi said angrily.

“Boy, what nonsense are you talking about?” His mama said exasperatedly, “Don’t pay no mind to these men folk of ours. They don’t have a lick of sense when it comes to you.” Her mama held out her arms for her daughter.

“Come on now, missus, you know the song. They used to sing it at school,” her daddy started in a low baritone and was joined in quick fashion by his sons Asher, Buzi, Cleo, Darius, Felix, Gallio and Haniel,

“Sapphire sapphire vicious blue
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Sapphire sapphire cripplin’ blue
Obscures the stars
Turn your kin ‘gainst you.”

“Ya’ll hush up all that noise. Ya’ll going to scare the girl. Just because the rest of you chaps not ready to leave home. All these boys and not one of them a man yet.”

“Come on now, missus, who fault is that?” Her father rolled his eyes. Ezilí was starting to question her decision to leave her home, leave her family, her friends, and her big-headed boy Jackson. But she shook off the feeling when her daddy whispered in her ear, “You’s the bravest of all my chaps.” She was determined to prove him right.

“You best get goin’. Tell your brothers bye,” her mother said pulling her in one more time. Ezilí felt a tear drop on her neck as they embraced, “Or take a few of ‘em with ya, I’s tired of them eating me out of house and home.” Her mama giggled recovering herself. The boys nearly tackled her to the ground. The older ones clutching her shoulders and the little ones clutching her knees, all of them crying.

The warnings kept coming. The cattle man, Mr. Jessup, a man who smelled like a mixture of cow, unwashed clothes, stale beer and black coffee told her it wasn't the town but the lake right outside the town that wasn't right. "The lake is pretty like a gem but pretty ain't always to be trusted. Those waters...they ain't safe."

"Ah, Mr. Jessup, not you too! "Everyone keep tellin' me not to go."

"I'm not tellin' you to do nothin'. Folks gotta choose their own path, I say. I'm just sayin' that lake ain't safe."

"You gonna sing me the song too?"

"What song?"

"Never mind. Why you say the lake ain't safe?"

"My cousin, she went skinny dippin' in those waters with her beau. She wasn't right after that. Lost herself. Family tried everythin', but she just couldn't seem to remember who she was. She was a sweet girl. A funny girl. Then she wasn't." Ezilí thought on staying put for a spell, but she found herself wanting to prove everyone wrong. She threw her bags in the back of Jessup's rusty pickup truck and climbed in. Doubts continued to ebb and flow in her like the gulf waters she grew up on. She had almost convinced herself that she was a fool for leaving so much behind for something as small as money but, Mr. Jessup's speeding had taken the choice from her. They had crossed the threshold of too far to turn back. Or at least that's what she would tell folks when they asked her. She looked up through the window shield in time to see the bluest waters she had ever seen. She had lived on the gulf her whole life and no matter the tides they had never been that deep dark blue that she saw now. As she looked on in wonder, she caught herself humming the song of the lake.

They told her she ought not to have come to that town. A tiny Geechee woman walked up to Ezilí and held out her hand when she walked into The Sapphire Stitch Company, "I'm Mackenzie, but they all call me Lil' Mack." Ezilí took her hand in hers and smiled.

"I'm Ezilí." Lil' Mack took some of her luggage and signaled for Ezilí to follow.

“I’ll get you set up in the other girls in the dorm. Ain’t much to get you acquainted with, we work, we eat, we cut up with each other every now and then and then we sleep.”

“How long you’ve been here?”

“Ah, ‘bout a year.”

“You don’t miss home?”

“I send money that way, family is rebuildin’ after the storm. So, without the money from this here job ain’t really no home to go to.” Ezilí nodded.

“So, what ya’ll do ‘round here when ya’ll ain’t working?” All the girls stopped and stared.

“Listen up good now, ain’t nothin’ out there worth it. You hear me?”

“Whatchu mean?”

“No one told you somethin’ ain’t right ‘bout this place?” Ezilí rolled her eyes.

“Then why ya’ll here?”

“Money, like I’s told you, but that don’t mean be stupid. Go to work, come back here and that’s it. Girls come in here with all kinds of ideas ‘bout what they can do outchere. We don’t see or hear from them again.”

“How ya’ll know they didn’t quit?”

“They things still here. Look I don’t aim to tell you what happened to ‘em cause no one knows, but I do know they gone and we here. Do’s with that whatchu will, girl.” As they walked to the dorms she listened as Lil’ Mack softly sang the song,

“Sapphire sapphire vicious blue
Tints the lens
Distorts the light within you
Sapphire sapphire contemptuous blue
Clouds all truth
Make a monster of you

Sapphire sapphire malicious blue
Eclipses the sun
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Mutes all that's said
Justifies not listenin' to you
Sapphire sapphire cripplin' blue
Obscures the stars

Turn your kin 'gainst you." During their breaks Ezilí would look out on the town and see the people coming and going. "It's a pretty town," she said staring out of the window. The town seemed normal, should couldn't for the life of her figure out where these stories had come from. Lil' Mack stood behind her glancing out, "Sun's out," she grumbled. "Usually, its covered in fog. Can't see mo' than a few feet from here."

Time didn't pass the same there, Ezilí thought. In the minutia of her routine a year had quickly passed without her even knowing. Lil' Mack and the girls brought her a sash. She looked at them confused. "You've been here a year, girl!"

"Really?" She draped the sash across her shoulder. "Doesn't seem that long." Lil' Mack asked as she sat at the foot of the bed, "Too busy having fun with us, huh?" She laughed, but it had no joy in it.

"You ok?" Lil' Mack didn't answer. She just stared ominously out of the window, which was curtained by a thick fog. Ezilí seemed to pull her out of a trance when she touched her on the shoulder. They walked dutifully to the factory floor. Ezilí was dreaming of the clear, starry night she spent with Jackson on his daddy's boat. Ezilí sewed the last few stitches into a coat when she felt the desperation of being home. Lil' Mack looked up from her station and could see it in her friend's face,

“Ain’t no sense in me talkin’ you out of it is there?” Ezilí shook her head. “Sister, people get lost in the fog. I pray you ain’t one of ‘em.” Lil’ Mack hugged tightly. Ezilí ran straight up to her bed and grabbed all her savings, her rosary and her coat. She would let nothing else weigh her down.

They all told her something was wrong with that town. She should have listened. The phrase, “in the thick of it” made more sense to her now as she stepped out into the fog. She could not see her hand held out in front of her. Trying to feel her way out of town she shuffled her feet being cautions not to trip. She figured the clouds were thick enough to stifle sounds, because she couldn’t hear any people, birds, or the wind or even the rustle of leaves.

Suddenly, two little hands touched her leg, when the face attached to those limbs appeared, all color fled from the small child’s face. He could not breathe, let alone scream. Ezilí panicked by the child’s expression turned to see what could have frightened him so, but she saw nothing. “What’s wrong boy,” she asked taking his face in her hands. Terrified beyond reason, the boy fainted. She quickly grabbed the boy and tried to find a place to take him for help. She heard what sounded like a church bell, she followed the sound to the door of the place of worship. “Help! Anyone here? This boy needs help!” She burst through the door and saw the sanctuary was full of people. She sighed with relief holding the child’s limp body for them to see. “He fainted,” She looked out amongst them and saw the same stunned look the boy had previously possessed, “I don’t know what’s wrong with him.”

A piercing scream sent the worshippers into chaos. They shrieked and ran. They threw Bibles and hymnals at her, “Leave you cursed daemon!” The pastor said, cowering behind his pulpit.

“Somebody, save the child!” Another lady screamed. Ezilí noticed that the more folks were looking poised to attack her. She was the monster they feared. Confused, she laid the child down and ran out of the church. “Don’t just stand there, get it!” She heard the screams behind her. And she couldn’t understand. Her hands looked the same. How was she the “it” they were

talking about? As she sprinted away, she heard the church bell ring angrily drowning out the shouts, “Monster! There’s a monster! Monster!”

The fog began to thin but she kept running until she saw the blue waters of the lake. She told herself that she had escaped. She told herself that she was safe. Thirsty and dripping with sweat, she walked to the bank and dipped her hand in the cold waters. She splashed her face and placed her cooled hand on the back of her neck. Ezilí gathered herself for a moment and then she made herself look at her reflection in the water. She saw herself but she did not believe what she saw. The people saw the monster and the monster was her. None of it was making any sense.

Thirst had finally overtaken her confusion and she dipped her hands into the waters cupping them under the surface. As she leaned in to sip, something pulled her in. The lake had swallowed her up. She felt herself fighting the sinking feeling, willing her lungs to hold on a little while longer, ignoring the burning in her muscles and the dizziness in her head. Besides the pounding of her own heart beat the only thing she could hear was that damned song,

“Sapphire sapphire vicious blue

Tints the lens

Distorts the light within you

Sapphire sapphire contemptuous blue

Clouds all truth

Makes a monster of you... “The blue of the lake was now completely black. She couldn’t even see the bubbles escaping her mouth. She felt all of the breath escaping as she tried to find her way to the surface, but her strength was leaving her,

“Sapphire sapphire malicious blue

Eclipses the sun

Changes the way they see you

Sapphire sapphire discreditin’ blue

Mutes all that’s said

Justifies not listenin' to you
Sapphire sapphire crippin' blue
Obscures the stars

Turn your kin 'gainst you." As she sank, she saw gold dots in the darkness and closed her eyes thinking it was the Lord's angels coming to take her to Heaven.

Ezilí woke to the light on her face. A chill was leaving her body and warmth was now coursing through her veins. She looked around confused. She did not know this place. And yet, she felt at peace there. It was a surprise to her as she had not felt peace since she left home. Dread took over when she realized that someone had to have brought her there and right away, she feared for their safety. Whoever the poor soul was, they did not deserve their impending doom. She panicked and tried to lift herself from the bed, but she had no strength in her bones to fight off the layers of heavy quilts and blankets. The door began to open, "Don't! Imma monster! Run away!" Ezilí buried her face under the covers. The woman spoke in a low dulcet tone like an expiating church organ,

"Hush now," she placed a comforting and firm hand on Ezilí's damp cheeks. "Gal, you been poisoned by a lie. You ain't no such thing." Ezilí willed herself to look at the brave woman. She stood over her with a face full of understanding. Her face was the color and texture red clay. She had gray eyes that seemed to match her luminous silver hair that was in two long braids that hung past where Ezilí could see. She was accompanied by a large dog whose thick ink like fur made his golden eyes shine bright. Ezilí struggled to sit up in the bed. The woman lifted her hand and she laid still. "Rest."

"Where am I?"

"My home."

"How I get here?"

"Musa," she petted the dog sitting at her side, "he found you and led you here through the wilderness." The dog seemed proud of himself as she scratched behind his ears.

“I don’t remember.”

“Most people don’t remember when they find themselves or when they lost themselves,” Ezilí blinked at that, “Who are you, gal?”

“Ezilí Godfrey.”

“Alright now, Miss Ezilí. I’m Yemoja Queen. Me and Musa is gonna take care of you until you strong enough.”

“Queen? Like Willis?” Yemoja nodded “I don’t want to put you out none, ma’am.”

“Hush now, gal. This a blessing for both of us. You get the help you need; I get to help someone like someone helped me. Ain’t yo place or my place to tell the Lord He made a mistake.”

“But,” Ezilí felt a wave of exhaustion come over her.

“But what? You think you can stand on your own two?” Ezilí knew she couldn’t and meekly shook her head.

“Good. I was startin’ think you was a plumb fool. Too much pride will kill you.”

“I ain’t proud.” Ezilí looked down.

“Hmph. Maybe you a plumb fool after all. That’s okay though, Miss Ezilí,” Yemoja patted the young woman’s shoulder, “The fool knows after he’s suffered.”

“You a wise woman,” Ezilí yawned trying to fight back the sleep.

“Ah, can’t take no credit for that, it’s Hesiod. Go back to sleep. Holler if you need me.” Ezilí was asleep before she could finish the sentence.

She saw Musa’s golden eyes and then blackness. She woke soaked by sweat, Musa sitting next to her knowingly. She thought she heard him say, “O God, heal her, I pray!” But he was a dog so, she pushed the thought away.

“What’s wrong with me?” Yemoja came in the room carrying a tray with a glass of water, a bowl of white bean stew and piece of hot water cornbread.

“Told ya, you been poisoned.” She sat the tray across her lap, “Eat.” Ezilí did as she was told. There was authority in Yemoja’s voice that prompted quick response.

“Poisoned? Who you think poisoned me?”

“That town did, child. You let them poison you with that sapphire lie they tell all of us that work down there.”

“Monsters...” Ezilí put down her spoon. Yemoja nodded.

“You no such thing. Unless you believe it so?”

“Why you never come back?” Yemoja walked to the chair across the room. Musa laid at her feet.,

“I had anotha truth. A bigger truth than the one I had with Willis. I had let him tell me for years I was one thing. I let them folks over there tell me I was another. But when I found myself, I wanted to keep it.” Ezilí slowly drank in the thirst-quenching liquid as well as the words she was hearing.

“Something in that lake pulled me in.” Yemoja sighed,

“The souls that believed the lie and became the monster. The monsters of Sapphire lake try to bring others down with them into the depths. It’s taken too many of us already.”

“You saved my life.”

“That was Musa. If you let me, I am here to help you live your life. The true one.” She got up and took the tray of half eaten food.

“I’m not a monster,” Ezilí whispered to herself repeatedly until the gravity of the description weighed her down.

Pappy was taking out the golden browned filets, “Yeah well, your mama sure ran up out of there after a while. Best thing could have happened too. This town has the best accountant and the church, and I could not have a better bookkeeper for the price.” Granny kissed him.

“I still want that raise, Jacob,” she teased. Their mother sighed.

“Ruby, don’t worry. I’m sure Dr. Barnett will be glad to let you take over his practice,”
Granny said squeezing her shoulders reassuringly, “He’s been everyone’s doctor so long, I bet he
can predict who’s going to be sick next.” Ruby relaxed and smiled,

“Is the food ready, yet?”

Shootin' Stars

Fitz was outside on the porch while his father was cutting his hair. Justé was paying close attention to the back of his eldest son's head when the younger children came out to watch. It wasn't long before the idea of watching became boring to the two younger Bien-Aime siblings and they began fighting. "Hey!" Their father shouted as their tussling grew louder, "I cannot concentrate with ya'll carrying on with this foolishness. You want your brother to look crazy?" The two giggled at the thought.

"He *already* look crazy, daddy," Naima teased her brother.

"I may look crazy, but least I'm not crazy like you," he stuck his tongue out at his little sister. Ruby stepped outside hearing all of the commotion.

"Why ya'll bothering your father and Fitz? Don't ya'll have something else to do?" Naima and Vaughn said nothing.

"Oh, now ya'll quiet." Justé said getting back to cutting Fitz's hair. Ruby stepped out on to the steps so she could see the sky. The little ones sat on one side of her. Naima on the steps and her little brother sat in her lap.

"Ya'll should really appreciate these starry skies. Not everyone gets to see stars this bright." Being too young to remember living in the city they were confused.

"Whatchu mean mama? Stars are the same everywhere," Naima said, "That's what I learned in science class." Her mama nodded.

"Yeah, your teacher is right. The stars are the same everywhere, but we all cannot see them the same. Lights make it hard; clouds make it hard and some other things do too," They sat for a while quietly looking to the stars' brilliance and listening to the buzz of daddy cutting Fitz's hair. Finally, Vaughn letting his curiosity get the better of him asked,

"What other things?" Ruby smiled and looked at her youngest son.

"Well some say the Devil and his demons had something to do with it." Naima groaned a little under her breath.

“Pastor wasn’t jokin’ when he said he was busy.” Their parents laughed at their daughter’s comment.

“No, he wasn’t. So, they say one day the Devil got bored.”

Devil had grown restless. He slumped in his throne. He sighed, “I need something to do.”

“Master, you rule the underworld and have dominion over all lost souls,” Afrit said trying his best to cheer his friend and master up.

“I know. But I grow weary of doing it every day for these past millennia,” the Devil whined.

“Sire, you have souls to corrupt and steal from your father’s flock,” Seth added. The other demons nodded encouragingly.

“It’s just become so tedious, and most of the humans’ faith is corrupted with the slightest bit of trouble. It’s not even a challenge.”

“I have an idea. Something you could do to lift your spirits,” Iblis walked to the Devil and placed his hand on his lord’s shoulder. The unconvinced Devil didn’t even lift his head to look at the demon. Instead, he grunted, prompting Iblis to offer his suggestion. “We could do target shooting.” Devil rose in his seat with excitement and began to show his treacherous grin.

“What shall we shoot?”

“Stars,” Iblis said pointing to the glimmering sky above them. The other demons in the chamber all murmured amongst themselves wondering how their king would respond. Devil rose to his feet enthusiastically and clapped the demon on his back,

“Brilliant! Oni get my guns! We’ll start tonight!”

Soon they were off to a clearing in the far northern regions of Devil’s dominion. Far from the fires of Hell, the stars shone more clearly. Devil and his demons whooped and cheered at all the stars in range. One by one Devil and the demons shot stars out of the sky. Phenex always

nervous asked before it his was his turn, “Do you think this could make God madder?” Devil laughed heartily and shot down a hundred stars in response.

“Phenex, how many times must I tell you that we’re damned if we do and damned if we don’t?” Phenex considered his ruler’s logic momentarily before taking his first shot.

Before long the sky seemed blacker. Devil and his demons had shot so many stars that the sky was no longer twinkling. The remaining stars fearing meeting the same fate as their brethren and dimmed their light.

Vaughn had dozed off and was still sitting in his sister’s lap, but his head had fallen over into his mother’s as well. “I’m glad they stopped before the sky was all black. I’m scared of the dark.”

“Most people are baby, but sometimes people also forget how valuable their light is and let it dim. But you, my most precious, you and your brothers should always shine especially when it is the darkest.” Mama kissed the girl and her son on the cheek.

Lucky's Eyes and Ears

Pappy brought the kids to the store to work Saturday. Granny went to the city to help their parents pack up their apartment in the city. Everyone had a job to do. Fitz was in charge of restocking the shelves and take out the trash. Naima was supposed to count the items and break down the boxes. Vaughn was dusting greeting the customers as they came in.

“Morning, Mrs. Devine!” Vaughn yelled at his teacher as she walked into the store.

“Morning, Vaughn,” the young lady smiled at the voice coming from the other side of the counter. “Morning Mr. Breedlove, I see you have help today.” He nodded,

“Yes ma’am. You know these critters have plenty of energy to help me around here.”

“Oh, I know, taught every one of them,” she smiled filling up her cup of coffee. “Can I get my usual for today?” Pappy nodded and sent the order to the kitchen,

“Sausage biscuit coming up. Reyline, fix the usual for Mrs. Devine!” Reyline popped her head around.

“Hey, Shirley! Coming right up.” Soon Reyline came around front and handed the teacher her sandwich.

“Girl, I meant to call you last night. Did you hear about...”

“Shh, you know we have cornfields in here,” Reyline said tossing her head over her shoulder. Shirley nodded.

“Call me tonight,” She paid for her sandwich and waved to the family.

“Aunt Reyline, we don’t have cornfields,” Vaugh said squinting at his aunt.

“Yeah we do,” she grabbed her small nephews face and smooshed it while kissing his forehead, “All over this store,” she laughed as she walked back to the kitchen. Vaughn blinked and looked up at his grandfather who was double checking the deliveries that were coming in and minding the register.

“Pappy, what she talkin’ ‘bout we have cornfields. I’ve never seen ‘em.” His grandfather looked up from his book at his grandson. He took off his spectacles.

“I don’t know son, but I used to know this farmer. Farmer Peppers had been growing stuff on that land since before I was born. When I was your age, I’d go down there and help old Farmer Peppers out for a little bit a change. Well, see Farmer Peppers considered himself a very lucky man, he had good land that grew everything he planted, he had a pretty wife who loved him, and he had two sweet little girls. Thing about luck though is that luck often times runs out.”

The rains started not coming like they used to, and his wells were drying up. Then his land wouldn’t grow nothing. It was too dry. Then his girls’ bellies started growling cause there wasn’t any food to feed them. Finally, his wife’s pretty face was becoming weary cause she was worried what they were going to do. Farmer Peppers stood out in the middle of his dry field wishing for a bit of luck and rain cloud to come his way.

It wasn’t long after the farmer had made his wish that he saw a man strutting down the dirt road in front of his land. The man, he thought, should be named Slick if his greased and combed back hair, shiny face and shoes as well as his colorful suit had anything to say about it. He watched the man closely as he didn’t recognize him and was trying to determine where could he have been heading in this part of the boondocks. As he watched, the man turned, caught his eye and turned to meet him in the middle of his barren field.

“Mr. Peppers, I presume?” The man stretched out his hand which had rings on every finger. The farmer nodded and tentatively reached his hand out to shake. “How do you do, sir? I heard you were in need of some luck.” Farmer Peppers blinked at the man shocked.

“Who told you that? And who are you?”

The man reached and put his arm around the farmer’s shoulder and smiled a wide smile that resembled the grin of a toothy bayou gator about to catch a big old catfish.

“Well good fellow, I make it my business to know these things. My name is Lucky.”

“What’s your family name?”

“Just Lucky, sir. I gots no family to talk about except yours and what I can do to help yours.” Farmer Peppers looked at the man curiously. He didn’t trust him, not even a little bit but he was mighty desperate.

“What is it you think you can do for me?” Lucky stepped back away from the farmer and stretched his arms wide.

“I can make all this fertile again. I can make this grow in no time. You can feed your family, pay your bills and have peace of mind with just a snap of my fingers.” The farmer stared at him a long while.

“Why would you do that for me?” Lucky bent over laughing.

“Good fellow, you’re a clever man. Can’t pull the wool over your eyes I see,” Peppers just looked at him stoned faced. “Alright, I want your wife. I’m mighty lonely and I need a woman to make my home, cook my meals and take care of me.” Farmer Peppers turned and walked away from the man. The man followed him through the dusty path all the way to the door of the family home.

“Get away from me! What kind of man preys upon another in his time of desperation?” Mrs. Peppers came out to check on her husband.

“Farmer, what’s wrong with you?” Her husband grabbed her hand and blocked her from the view of the slick stranger.

“This man is trying to steal you from me. Promising me fertile lands with a snap of his fingers and such nonsense.” The woman looked over her husband’s shoulder to see the brightly dressed man polishing his nails with a fine silk handkerchief.

“Mister, can you really do what you say?” She asked. Lucky without even looking up flicked his wrist and produced a patch of greens in a pot that had been taken over by weeds. She touched the bundle knowing she could make a meal with them, the small piece of salt pork she had stored in the dark corner of the basement, the half a cup of cornmeal her neighbor had brought over and the cup of dried peas the deacon gave them. “Farmer, this is more than you’ve

grown in months. Our children are hungry!” She reached for Lucky while never letting go of her husband’s hand. Then she was gone, and Lucky was too.

Farmer Peppers was too stunned that his wife had slipped from his grasp to notice the fields had become fertile and overgrown with crops. When he came to, he cried out and his children ran out to see what was wrong.

All the neighbors told Farmer Peppers how his luck had turned around. They were amazed at how his land could produce so much. Some people were even jealous of the Peppers. But the Peppers family did not feel so lucky. Their bellies were full, their farm was producing, they were able to provide for themselves and others in need, but they had lost so much when Lucky took Mrs. Peppers.

One day Farmer Bean came to talk to Farmer Peppers, the man looked mighty weary. He sat the man down and gave him a cool drink, “What’s the matter friend?”

“I’m desperate, Peppers. I got a family to feed. Tell me, how did you turn things around so fast?”

“You don’t want that. Can I do something to help?”

“You can help by telling me.”

“Bean, a man name Lucky did all this, but he took my wife. My children have no mother now.” The man considered what Farmer Peppers said and stood to walk back to his home. As he stepped out into the lush fields he turned and looked at Peppers with a cat like smile, “What if we trick Lucky?” The two men sat and came up with a plan to trick Lucky into returning Peppers’ wife and helping Bean.

The next morning Lucky was strutting down the road in front of Mr. Bean’s farm. “Mr. Bean, I presume?” The farmer nodded. “How do you do, sir? I heard you were desperately in need of some luck.” Farmer Bean stood silent looking at him curiously. The man offered his ring adorned hand and the farmer took it.

“My name is Lucky, and this here is my wife,” suddenly Mrs. Peppers appeared. She was dressed in fine, flashy clothes that resembled Lucky’s ostentatious attire. Farmer Bean blinked and looked over his shoulder nervously,

“How do you do ma’am?” Farmer Bean tipped his hat. Lucky stepped toward the farmer and smiled that bayou gator smile.

“Tell our friend Farmer Peppers to come on out,” Farmer Bean stepped back shocked and Mrs. Peppers began to cry, “Oh now, look ya’ll gone and upset my wife when all I tried to do is help.” Farmer Peppers ran out to try and take his wife but as soon as he was close enough to reach her, she disappeared. The two men stared coldly at the slick man.

“How did you know?” Farmer Peppers said through his gritted teeth. Lucky threw himself back laughing heartily.

“There’s a reason your lands are now full of corn and potatoes, Peppers. I have my eyes and ears on you,” he smiled and then looked at Farmer Bean, “I can make all this fertile again. I can make this grow in no time. You can feed your family, pay your bills and have peace of mind with just a snap of my little finger.” The farmer stared at him a long while.

“Why would you do that for me?” Lucky put his arm around the man’s shoulder.

“Another clever man. Alright, I want your children. I’m still mighty lonely and my home is too quiet. I need to hear the pitter patter of little feet and I think my wife would be happy to be a mother again.” Peppers stood quietly with his hands tightly clenched in fists. Farmer Bean shook off Lucky’s arm and walked away from the man.

“Get off my land!” Mrs. Bean came out to check on her husband,

“Farmer, what’s wrong with you?”

“This man is trying to steal our children. Promising me fertile lands with a snap of his fingers.” The woman looked over her husband’s shoulder to see the brightly dressed man polishing his nails with a fine silk handkerchief. Then she saw Farmer Peppers standing like a statue.

“Farmer Peppers,” she called out, “is this the man that saved your farm?” Peppers nodded sadly. “Take them, my children deserve better than we can give them,” she said with tears in her eyes. Her husband’s eyes widened in shock, anger and sorrow. And with a snap Farmer Bean’s farm was fertile too.

Vaughn looked at his Pappy for a long while but didn’t say anything. He slowly walked back to the aisle where his sister was breaking down boxes. “So, where’s corn,” Vaughn asked his sister in what he thought was a whisper.

“She callin’ us nosy,” Fitz yelled from the front.

Forgivin n' Forgettin

Naima was watching the register while Pappy helped Aunt Reyline with something in the kitchen. A girl in Fitz's class came in with her mother.

"Well, hey there Naima," the woman said waving.

"Afternoon, Ms. Lee," Naima said smiling. Fitzgerald poked his head around the shelf and looked at the girl who was somewhat hiding behind her mother. He spoke as he walked around to the front of the store,

"Hey Ms. Lee, Lacie. How ya'll doing?" Naima caught eyes with her brother. He slightly nodded understanding her expression.

"Just fine, Fitz."

"Can I help you find something, Ms. Lee?" Fitz asked while watching the young girl like a hawk.

"Thank you, but no I've been coming here so long I know where to get exactly what I need." Ms. Lee went to tend to her shopping and Lacie started to linger and straggle back where the candy was. Fitz followed her. Lacie walked along the aisle picking up things and putting them down.

"Trying to decide?" Fitzgerald said following close.

"Huh," she looked at Fitz, "Oh no, just waiting on my mama, you know." Lacie walked to the magazines and started flipping through one. Fitz took it from her.

"You have to pay for it to read it, Lacie," the boy said flatly.

"You trippin', Fitzgerald. It's just a magazine."

"It's not just a magazine, Lacie," he lowered his voice so that Ms. Lee couldn't hear them, "I know you steal. I caught you myself a couple of times."

"Dang boy, that was last year! And I apologized, didn't I?"

“And I accepted it, but I ain’t stupid. Terrence caught you trying to steal his snack yesterday. Go wait for your mama on the stoop,” Fitz put the magazine back on the rack and held his arm out showing the girl the way. Lacie rolled her eyes and walked out the door.

When Fitz turned around to go back to work, he saw Pappy watching him. He looked at him sternly and signaled for the boy to come to him. When Fitz got to the kitchen his grandfather didn’t say anything before, he started crying. “Pappy, I’m sorry I was rude to a customer. I know you always tell us to be nice but that girl, Lacie, she steals.” Aunt Reyline walked over to see what the fuss was about. Pappy hugged the boy.

“Quiet down, boy. I ain’t mad at you,” He softly patted his back. Fitz sniffed, wiped her face and looked at his grandfather quizzically,

“You’re not?” Pappy shook his head.

“What’s going on here?” Reyline asked looking at her father and nephew.

“He stopped a thief,” Pappy smiled as Reyline peeked outside to see Ms. Lee paying for her stuff. She waved at the lady.

“Ms. Lee is a thief?” Aunt Reyline looked stunned.

Pappy and Fitz shook their heads, “That Lacie girl,” Pappy said. “She tries every time she comes here.”

“Tell her mama,” Reyline said.

“That girl can do no wrong let her mama tell it,” Pappy said rolling his eyes. “I just wanted to tell you how proud I was of you for putting her in her place.”

“I thought you were going to tell me to forgive her,” Fitzgerald sniffed again.

“Forgiveness is only the Lord’s to give,” Reyline said going back to work.

Pappy waved her off, “There’s forgivin’ and forgettin’ and you need to be careful with both.” Fitz looked at his grandfather confused,

“What you mean, Pappy?” His grandfather led the boy back into the main shop where they sat on the two stools by the register. Naima went to break down more boxes and to boss Vaughn around.

“Let me tell you like my granddaddy told me,” Pappy grabbed two root beers from the ice chest next to him. He opened both and handed one to his oldest grandchild. “They were twins, Forgivin’ and Forgettin’, but they were the kind that didn’t look nothing alike. In fact, they didn’t even act alike. They were so different that often times folks even questioned if they was kin at all.”

Forgivn’ and Forgettin’ worked on a farm. The farmer they worked for was having some trouble and he asked the boys for some help, “Forgivin’ I needs you to watch my orchard. Someone’s been stealing fruit off my trees. Costin me all kinds of money and causin’ me all kinds of problems. Gettin’ so bad my wife is plenty mad at me. Go on down there and put a stop to it.” And off the boy went.

Then the farmer turned to the other twin, “Forgettin’ I needs you to watch my sheep. There’s a wolf running off with ‘em. Wolf bout to snatch up most of my flock. Costin’ me all kinds of money and causin’ me all kinds of problems. Gettin’ so bad the bank is plenty mad at me. Go on down there and put a stop to it.” And off the boy went.

By the time Forgivin’ got to the orchard the sun was setting. He got his fire going, his coffee made and got comfortable sitting under a tall apple tree. Before long he saw a shadow in the distance. He snuck around to get closer to the thief. When he got right near him, he yelled out, “Thief!” The bandit was scared and dropped all the fruit and fell out of the tree. Forgivin’ tried to break the thief’s fall. Somehow, he was able to catch the crook, “Why, you just a kid! What you doin’ out here stealin’ fruit from a hardworking man like Farmer?” He put the small girl down but held her by her collar.

“My family is hungry, mister. My ma and pa is sick and I got four brothers and sisters to look after,” the girl’s face was wet with tears. Forgivin’ felt bad looking at that pitiful girl and handed her the fruit she dropped.

“Alright, alright now. Look you take this and I’ll ‘splain to Farmer, but you got to stop stealin’. He a nice man. He a kind man. Ask him for some work. I’m sure he’ll understand. And I know he’ll do what he can. All will be forgiven.” The little thief went on her way with the apples.

The next day farmer came to the orchard and found Forgivin’ sound asleep under the tree. The farmer kicked his foot to wake him, “Boy! You fell asleep on the job and let the thief steal my fruit?”

Forgivin’ stood up and fixed his shirt and wiped the drool from his mouth, “No sir, issa a simple misunderstandin’. The thief ain’t really no thief.” Farmer looked at the boy through squinted eyes.

“Whatchu mean ain’t no thief? Is my fruit gone? Did someone take it?”

“Yessir, yessir. What I mean is the thief is a hungry girl tryna feed her family. I let her take the fruit last night. Told her you’d understand. I told her you’d forgive her.” The farmer blinked at the boy.

“You told the girl what?”

“I said the farmer is a nice man, he’s a kind man. If she ask you, you may even give her work. But not to steal from you no more.” Farmer put his hands on the boy’s shoulders and looked him straight in the eye.

“I thank you for your kind words Forgivin’. I thank you for all the work you done for me over the years. But I have to let you go.”

“Why, Farmer?”

“You let someone steal from me even when I told you how that was causin’ me problems,” Forgivin’ hung his head in understanding.

“I’m sorry, Farmer.” And the boy was off. A little while after he was making his way from the farm the girl crossed his path.

“Hello, I’m goin’ to talk to the farmer now. Ask him for work like you said,” She smiled.

“Well, good luck to you cause he got a vacancy.” He marched on down the road.

While Forgivin’ had found himself without a job, Forgettin’ was just waking up to see the farmer looking down at him sleeping. Farmer looked plenty mad. The boy quickly stood up, “Mornin’ sir.”

The farmer grumbled, “You let the wolf take more of my flock!” Forgettin’ looked around and scratched his head.

“Nah sir. I did no such thing. I fought that wolf off.”

“Then how come my sheep is missin’,” the farmer stood with his nostrils flaring.

“I swear I don’t know, sir.” Forgettin’ started counting the sheep.

Farmer took a deep breath to calm himself. He put his hands on the boy’s shoulders, “Tell me ‘xactly what happened last night.”

“Well, like I told ya I caught the wolf and fought him off. All the sheep were here. I made my fire. Ate my dinner. Then another wolf came.”

The farmer tilted his head, “You didn’t tell me you fought two wolves.” Forgettin’ shook his head, “No, I didn’t fight that wolf. That wolf was a different wolf, he told me he was just lost tryin’ to find his home.”

“Say what now?”

“Well, then I was reading my book watching the sheep and another wolf came.”

“Another wolf?”

“Yeah, this wolf said he was looking for his brother. I told him ‘bout the other wolf and he went lookin’ for him.”

“Did you count the sheep?”

“Well, why would I do that? These weren’t sheep stealin’ wolves like the first one”

“How do you know that, Forgettin’?” Forgettin’ thought on what the farmer said.

“Now you mention it, they all kind of looked the same,” the boy continued thinking.

Farmer took a deep breath, “Forgettin’, I’m going to have to let you go. I thank you for all you done, but you let a wolf take from me when I told you all the trouble it was causin’ me.”

Forgettin’ hung his head and made his way off the farm. As he walked away, he saw a wolf resting on a hill surrounded by three dead sheep, “I’m going to kill you, wolf! You cost me my job. And you stole from the farmer,” as Forgettin’ was about to stab the wolf the wolf stopped him and said,

“Steal? Why, I never! You must be talking of another wolf. It wasn’t me. I promise.”

Forgettin’ thought on what the wolf said and put his knife down.

“When I find that wolf, I’m going to make me a coat,” Forgettin’ said turning back to the road.

“Not if I don’t get you first,” said the wolf. To this day no one knows what happened to the twins. But there was tell of a fat wolf not far from the old farmer’s house.

Fitz looked at his Pappy, “I don’t get it.”

“Forgiving and forgetting, as my granddaddy would say, ain’t never left a man with more money in his pocket or unscathed.”

“Ooh, Daddy! I’m gonna tell Mama that you’re over here tryin’ to corrupt these babies!”

Pappy waved Aunt Reyline off, “Hush, girl! Jesus ain’t ever told no one to be a plumb fool. I’m trying to teach this boy about the world,” Pappy patted Fitz on the shoulder and went back into the kitchen where he and his daughter debated the story. Fitz got comfortable on the stool knowing his Pappy trusted him to watch the store and the register.

By the time the kids got home from working with Pappy they were tired. Fitz, Naima and Vaughn were sprawled out on a pallet they laid on the floor. Pappy was in the kitchen making dinner for the family when Ruby, Justé and Lou walked in. “We’re,” Lou began to call out before realizing the children were asleep.

Ruby grabbed her husband's hand and pulled him to the pallet where they tucked in exhausted next to their children. Granny tip toed to the kitchen and kissed her husband, "Whatcha makin' Mr. Breedlove?"

"Roasted that chicken, finishing the greens and yams," he said checking his pots.

"Smells good."

"Ya'll finish up down there?" He asked while she sat at the table. He poured a cold drink and sat it on the table in front of her. She smiled.

"Yeah," she said sipping.

"I don't know what kind of prayers you were saying but God sure delivered didn't He?" They smiled looking out to the living room counting every one of their blessing sleeping soundly in the safe and comfort of home.

Vita

SaMantha (SaM) Shields was born April 9, 1981 in Houston, Texas to Carolyn and George Shields. She is a third generation, veteran teacher who has taught grades six through twelve. She is a proud lifelong resident of Third Ward in Houston, Texas. She is a graduate of Incarnate Word Academy as well as Houston Baptist University where she received a dual bachelor's degrees in political science and English.

While pursuing her MFA, SaM has been responsible for training teachers. As either a department chair or lead teacher, she has led multiple trainings either at a district, campus or department level. Her experience in training has included sessions of up to 50 teachers. SaM Shields is a motivated content specialist with a commitment to the achievement and successes of others. Skilled in the design of student-centered and project-based learning that addresses the diverse needs and backgrounds found in everyday life. She optimizes her skills in student and professional development, communicating, creative and innovative lesson design to ensure growth and mastering of goals.

In her limited spare time, SaM, is an avid traveler and has been to all seven continents. "I survived Antarctica!" Even though, she maintains an active and full life, she always makes time to read and write. SaM is currently working on several creative endeavors including but not limited to a podcast and short story collect. Publishing is ever on the forefront of her mind and there is no doubt you will be seeing more from her soon.