

Triple Dare

When I was four I was a stripper.
I guess I started early. The boy next door
DARED me, he said
I wasn't born from my momma because
I didn't have a belly button,
I had to prove him wrong.

My grandma told it was time to go
and get my own whuppin' switch
from the thorniest bush in the backyard,
because it "was time for me to learn
who you should take your clothes off for,
and who you shouldn't".

When I was five,
and too short to hang
clothes on the rope line outside,
but not too young to identify
whose underwear was whose.
That same boy dared me,
and that same grandma spanked me,
but with a different switch that she picked out herself,
claiming I wasn't hard enough on myself to pick
a good one that sang in the wind
before it hit my legs.

That boy grew up to be a man who
kept daring women to do all sorts of things they shouldn't
been doing,
but I married him,
because he dared me.

Grandma wasn't able to
teach me a dog gone thing.

Camille

There was something about the air...
Camille's cancer was eating it away,
spitting back out
her inevitable end.

I witnessed that ritual
once a week.
It was my duty,
Camille being my mother's best friend
and I, my mother's daughter,
though my palms always sweat
and my fingers always clung until
my mother began peeling me,
finger by finger, separating us.

I searched for shadows in that room to make myself
invisible. There were many,
but the smell lurked there
along with Camille's nightmares.
In the darkness where even the sun refused to enter,
she whispered to me,
"Sweet Baby, come to Camille"
as if approaching death was as easy for me
as it was for her.

When she died,
my mother shed fresh tears
as if she had never wept for Camille before.
And she took me to that bedroom
one more time
assuring me that whatever I had feared
had been released.
So I sat in the hesitant sunlight
watching her fold the
air
that was Camille
and pack it neatly away.

Nancy Beal: 1820

I found you, Grandma,
hidden in the Archives
in a census. Did they even let you
give your name?
Who asked the questions,
and who gave the answers
that would define your life two centuries later,
giving me so little to understand who you really were?

Nancy.
Your granddaughter,
carries your name into a generation
where there are no slaves such as you were.
She dances to tribal rhythms embedded
in Hip Hop, in Jazz, in melodic refrains
you might have hummed
unconsciously
as you toiled in a hot North Carolina field,
or baked in a humid southern kitchen,
careful not be to overheard,
determined to remain silent when the overseer passed,
lest it be mistaken
for contentment.

Cornered

I have stood on corners,
shaking with fear and cold,
waiting with my sister, on a northeastern November night,
neon blinking “Budweiser” in a ghoulish light on our young
Black faces. My sister wasn’t old enough to protect herself,
so how could she protect me?

The boys who could be men were coming
toward us. The street lamp lit up the mischief in their eyes,
and I wished the light
would hypnotize them, and hold them at that spot until
our mother could come out of the bar to rescue us.
But the bar windows were tinted dark.
No one is meant to see through these,
windows dark enough to protect the ones inside
who start their drinking early in the day
and stop early the next.
Our mother did not do that, she was not like that.
She was the mother who says, “I’ll only be a minute/
just wait right here on the corner/ by the door/you’ll be safe/I’ll be right back out”
and we had to believe her,
she was our mother,
and we had no choice.

The men who could be boys were saying things
our mother would have never allowed her daughters to hear. She would have
shut them up. She would have
washed their mouths out with pure Ivory soap,
and if they tried to spit it out on the dirty street,
she would not have let them,
not until she thought their mouths would not allow those words to live there.
But the damage was done.
I won’t forget
their words,
the sound of their laugh,
and the lie
that my sister gave to me,
that this did not happen/ we will not tell Mommy/she feels bad enough all the time
with her troubles/ don’t give her any more.

So she wrapped her protection around
our mother instead of me.
And an hour later we caught the last bus running in the city,
staring out at our reflections against the darkness,

riding past so many corners,
some healthy and happy,
some not so much,
until our mother reached up
and pulled the cord.