

# Exploring History in Poetry



## Table of Contents

### Creation and Origin Stories

*By reconfiguring the narratives of where we began, we can change perspectives on the present and future. These poems recast the narratives of source.*

- The Sea is History.....Pg 4
- A Brief History of Hostility.....Pg 7

### (Re) Definition

*Definitions have the power to inscribe meaning. These poems rewrite the definitions of words to align them more with the experiences and truths.*

- Sovereign.....Pg 11
- Freeborn..... Pg 12

### Persona

*Who tells a story can change or inflect the meaning of the story. These poems use different speakers—human and non-human—to offer their perspectives on events.*

- Katrina.....Pg 13
- Conversation with Phillis Wheatley #14.....Pg 14
- The Train Speaks.....Pg 16

### Reckoning with the Past: Personal and Collective

*Historical moments leave tangible and intangible traces on people directly impacted by them. These poems catalog what and who are left behind to pick up the pieces.*

- The Afterbirth, 1931.....Pg 17
- Erecting Stones.....Pg 22

### Engaging Historical Moments

*Writers have various ways of approaching the same historical moment. These poems express the speaker's response to the murder of Emmett Till.*

- Afterimages.....Pg 23



- IV (excerpt from *A Wreath for Emmett Till*).....Pg 26
- A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon.....Pg 27

### **Virginia History**

*The Commonwealth has a rich and fraught history. These poems engage that history, focusing on the places and spaces that bore witness.*

- Fieldwork.....Pg 31
- Monticello House Tour.....Pg 36

### **Experiments**

*Experiments in poetry can take on different forms. These poems break apart language by interrogating the meaning of words and showing hidden truths through erasure.*

- Discourse on the Logic of Language.....Pg 37
- ‘Pages 1-4’, an excerpt from The Ferguson Report: An Erasure.....Pg 39

### **Inscribing Joy into History**

*Our stories are not only marked by pain. These poems inject poetic facts, highlight celebratory gatherings, and imagine possibilities for archiving joy.*

- A Small Needful Fact.....Pg 43
- We Should Make a Documentary About Spades.....Pg 44
- Fish Fry.....Pg 46

### **Writing for an Occasion**

*Occasional poems mark important events, whether personal (a wedding, birth of a child) or communal. These poems commemorate Black figures dedicated to public service.*

- Praise Song for the Day.....Pg 48
- (Re)Dedication.....Pg 50



**The Sea is History**  
**By Derek Walcott**

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?  
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,  
in that grey vault. The sea. The sea  
has locked them up. The sea is History.

First, there was the heaving oil,  
heavy as chaos;  
then, like a light at the end of a tunnel,

the lantern of a caravel,  
and that was Genesis.  
Then there were the packed cries,  
the shit, the moaning:

Exodus.  
Bone soldered by coral to bone,  
mosaics  
mantled by the benediction of the shark's shadow,

that was the Ark of the Covenant.  
Then came from the plucked wires  
of sunlight on the sea floor

the plangent harps of the Babylonian bondage,  
as the white cowries clustered like manacles  
on the drowned women,

and those were the ivory bracelets  
of the Song of Solomon,  
but the ocean kept turning blank pages

looking for History.  
Then came the men with eyes heavy as anchors  
who sank without tombs,

brigands who barbecued cattle,  
leaving their charred ribs like palm leaves on the shore,

then the foaming, rabid maw  
of the tidal wave swallowing Port Royal,  
and that was Jonah,  
but where is your Renaissance?

Sir, it is locked in them sea-sands  
out there past the reef's moiling shelf,  
where the men-o'-war floated down;

strop on these goggles, I'll guide you there myself.  
It's all subtle and submarine,  
through colonnades of coral,

past the gothic windows of sea-fans  
to where the crusty grouper, onyx-eyed,  
blinks, weighted by its jewels, like a bald queen;

and these groined caves with barnacles  
pitted like stone  
are our cathedrals,

and the furnace before the hurricanes:  
Gomorrah. Bones ground by windmills  
into marl and cornmeal,

and that was Lamentations—  
that was just Lamentations,  
it was not History;

then came, like scum on the river's drying lip,  
the brown reeds of villages  
mantling and congealing into towns,

and at evening, the midges' choirs,  
and above them, the spires  
lancing the side of God

as His son set, and that was the New Testament.

Then came the white sisters clapping  
to the waves' progress,

and that was Emancipation—

jubilant, O jubilation—  
vanishing swiftly  
as the sea's lace dries in the sun,

but that was not History,  
that was only faith,  
and then each rock broke into its own nation;

then came the synod of flies,  
then came the secretarial heron,  
then came the bullfrog bellowing for a vote,

fireflies with bright ideas  
and bats like jetting ambassadors  
and the mantis, like khaki police,

and the furred caterpillars of judges  
examining each case closely,  
and then in the dark ears of ferns

and in the salt chuckle of rocks  
with their sea pools, there was the sound  
like a rumour without any echo

of History, really beginning.



**A Brief History of Hostility**  
**By Jamaal May**

In the beginning  
there was the war.

The war said let there be war  
and there was war.

The war said let there be peace  
and there was war.

The people said music and rain  
evaporating against fire in the brush  
was a kind of music  
and so was the beast.

The beast that roared  
or bleated when brought down  
was silent when skinned  
but loud after the skin  
was pulled taut over wood  
and the people said music  
and the thump thump  
thump said drum.  
Someone said  
war drum. The drum said war  
is coming to meet you in the field.  
The field said war  
tastes like copper,  
said give us some more, said look  
at the wild flowers our war plants  
in a grove and grows  
just for us.

Outside sheets are pulling  
this way and that.

Fields are smoke,  
smoke is air.

We wait for fingers to be bent  
knuckle to knuckle,

the porch overrun  
with rope and shotgun

but the hounds don't show.



We beat the drum and sing  
like there's nothing outside  
but rust-colored clay and fields

of wild flowers growing  
farther than we can walk.

Torches may come like fox paws  
to steal away what we plant,

but with our bodies bound  
by the skin, my arc to his curve,

we are stalks that will bend  
and bend and bend...

fire for heat  
fire for light  
fire for casting figures on a dungeon wall

fire for teaching shadows to writhe  
fire for keeping beasts at bay  
fire to give them back to the earth

fire for the siege  
fire to singe  
fire to roast  
fire to fuse rubber soles to collapsed crossbeams  
fire for Gehenna

fire for Dante  
fire for Fallujah  
fire for readied aim

fire in the forge that folds steel like a flag  
fire to curl worms like cigarette ash  
fire to give them back to the earth

fire for ancient reasons: to call down rain  
fire to catch it and turn it into steam  
fire for churches  
fire for a stockpile of books  
fire for a bible-black cloak tied to a stake

fire for smoke signals  
fire to shape gun muzzle and magazine  
fire to leap from the gut of a furnace  
fire for Hephaestus





fire for pyres' sake  
fire licking the toes of a quiet brown man  
fire for his home  
fire for her flag  
fire for this sand, to coax it into glass

fire to cure mirrors  
fire to cure leeches  
Fire to compose a nocturne of cinders

fire for the trash cans illuminating streets  
fire for fuel  
fire for fields  
fire for the field hand's fourth death

fire to make a cross visible for several yards  
fire from the dragon's mouth  
fire for smoking out tangos  
fire to stoke like rage and fill the sky with human remains  
fire to give them back to the earth  
fire to make twine fall from bound wrists  
fire to mark them all and bubble black  
any flesh it touches as it frees

They took the light from our eyes. Possessive.  
Took the moisture from our throats. My arms,  
my lips, my sternum, sucked dry, and  
lovers of autumn say, *Look, here is beauty.*  
Tallness only made me an obvious target made of  
off-kilter limbs. I'd fall either way. I should get a  
*to-the-death* tattoo or metal ribbon of some sort.  
War took our prayers like nothing else can,  
left us dumber than remote drones. Make  
me a loyal soldier and I'll make you a  
lamenting so thick, metallic, so tank-tread-hard.

Now make tomorrow a gate shaped like a man.  
I can't promise, when it's time, I won't hesitate,  
cannot say I won't forget to return in fall and  
guess the names of the leaves before they change.

The war said bring us your dead  
and we died. The people said music  
and bending flower, so we sang ballads

in the aisles of churches and fruit markets.  
The requiem was everywhere: a comet's tail  
disappearing into the atmosphere,

the wide mouths of the bereft men that have sung...  
On currents of air, seeds were carried  
as the processional carried us

through the streets of a forgetting city,  
between the cold iron of gates.  
The field said soil is rich wherever we fall.

Aren't graveyards and battlefields  
our most efficient gardens?  
Journeys begin there too if the flowers are taken

into account, and shouldn't we always  
take the flowers into account? Bring them to us.  
We'll come back to you. Peace will come to you

as a rosewood-colored road paver  
in your grandmother's town, as a trench  
scraped into canvas, as a violin bow, a shovel,

an easel, a brushstroke that covers  
burial mounds in grass. And love, you say,  
is a constant blade, a trowel that plants

and uproots, and tomorrow  
will be a tornado, you say. Then war,  
a sick wind, will come to part the air,

straighten your suit,  
and place fresh flowers  
on all our muddy graves.

**Sovereign**  
**By Jamila Osman**

The body of a girl  
is a nation

with no flag  
of its own.

Its borders slick  
as the oil in her hair.

In Somali freedom  
is a word only men know.

In English freedom  
is the sound a gun makes

as it loosens a bullet  
from its barrel.

A girl is a sovereign state.

I will not be a stranger  
here or anywhere.



**Freeborn**  
**By Yalie Kamara**

In Krio, there is a word with Atlantic Ocean spray still swirling in its gut:  
Freeborn. I heard this word often after dinner was prepared. If, say,

my sister and I couldn't help but shovel soft, clementine-hued heaps  
of jollof rice into our mouths on our way to the dining room, my mother

would stop us, demanding that we eat only after sitting at the table. Like  
Freeborns. I should tell you that

she would then tuck herself into the corner of the kitchen, standing up,  
no sound from her but the harpsichord clink of silverware against plate.

Freeborn—I'd still like to teach her to. Freeborn. Eye closed, I imagine us  
Freeborning somewhere far from this beige bungalow, ripe with the smell of

stewed onions and tomatoes. We Freeborn elsewhere—with a coastal view,  
on our beach-chair throne. The waves' fangs hungrily rise before us.

Freeborn: I give my mother this old language, watch her grip it between  
arthritic fingers, watch her toss the fossilized noun-verb back. Far.

Far enough to hit the water in its tonsils.  
Far enough to choke the entire sea.



**Katrina**  
**By Patricia Smith**

I was birthed restless and elsewhere

gut dragging and bulging with ball lightning, slush,  
broke through with branches, steel

I was bitch-monikered, hipped, I hefted  
a whip rain, a swirling sheet of grit.

Scraping toward the first of you, hungering for wood, walls,  
unturned skin. With shifting and frantic mouth, I loudly loved  
the slow bones

of elders, fools, and willows.

**Conversation with Phillis Wheatley #14**  
**By Tiana Clark**

*recovered letter from Obour Tanner*

To Phillis Wheatley in Boston [Massachusetts]

New Port, February 6th, 1772

Dear Sister,

I'm a savage. There is a savage-me inside, wild-thick as sin, so much, my Soul  
is clabbered, but there is a Change, I sense, inside my curdled mess, Christ hung

and crucified in me, daily, a Saving Change. The ship. Do you feel the ship, pitching,  
sometimes, inside the skin under your skin -chanting- as the Atlantic *whispered*,

lulling us, fluid as hymn and semen, in wet languages we couldn't understand?

Remember the ships

that brought us over the bent world. Let us praise these wooden beasts that saved  
the evil beast of us. Do you remember the ship, Phillis, do you remember rocking...

the rocking black milk, like I do? Remember the bowels from the reek  
inside the deathly ship? There was nothing in us to recommend us to God,

except the bowels of divine love. Remember inky black, starless black,  
blue-black with moaning, smelled like salt and salvation: God's skin hammered

with long nails like our breath, bleeding.

But we converted—we have been saved by a Saving  
Change: my Heart is a true snow-white-snow Heart, Of true Holiness, pure

as buttermilk, evangelical as buttermilk. But Repentance can save our people  
from a land of seeming Darkness, and where the divine Light of revelation

(being cloaked) is as Darkness. What was darker than the bowels of that ship  
you were named after, do you remember Phillis, how black, black is?

The mold? Our sin, the trigger—that mist was on everything, fuzzing our damp



little bodies with spores, encircling the air, emerald rust crawled and blossomed  
inside our young lungs—it coughs and rackets the bright blood from us, like a claw  
scraping, no, like soft applause from the balcony for the swarthy to sit upon  
during church, like when we met, I was a dozen broken roses, bruised as velvet,  
English and reaching desire for you,  
across the pews, across the vast|empty spaces, where two slaves  
(who could read and write) could touch—each other—there, as women  
and call it: Praise.

Let us marvel at the Love and Grace that bought  
and brought us here. Amen.

Your very humble servant and friend,  
Obour Tanner



**The Train Speaks**  
By Eve L. Ewing

*...the presence of Negroes in large numbers in our great cities is not a menace in itself. (The Negro in Chicago, xiii)*

Even now, I dream of them, all my babies.  
Quiet nights in the railyard,  
When the little feet skitter beneath me,  
When the last of the strong men with his  
gleaming silver buttons has locked the door  
and laid his hands against me,  
warm palms offering a silent farewell,  
I see them dancing in every passing cloud.

My babies, my babies. Born unto me  
in the hills and green lands, loose threads  
catching in my sharp parts when they don't watch out,  
blistered hands hauling parcels of burlap  
as hefty and shapeless as bound cotton.  
They move like rabbits, then. They look  
for a lash that isn't there, even them that never felt it.  
It's in their shoulders.  
The lash lives in their shoulders.

Long after the last biscuit is gone,  
when the sunrise brings steel mountains,  
my children look and look through the space  
I have made for them, the gift I prepared.  
They are safe within but can see without.  
They feel it before they know the words,  
then smile when it comes to them— it's flat.  
The land is flat. And they smile to think of it,  
this new place, the uncle or cousin who will  
greet them, the hat they will buy, the ribbons.  
They know not the cold, my babies.  
They know not the men who are waiting  
and angry. They know not that the absence  
of signs does not portend the absence of danger.  
My innocent children. My precious ones.  
I can never take you home. You have none. But oh,  
if I could keep you here, safe in my iron heart,  
I would never let you go out into the wind.





**The Afterbirth, 1931**  
**By Nikky Finney**

We were a Colored Clan of Kinfolk  
Who threw soil not salt  
Over our shoulders  
Who tendered close the bible  
Who grew and passed around the almanac at night  
So we would know  
What to plant at first light

Black soil and sweet brown sorghum  
From the every morning biscuits  
Mama Susan fixed  
Dripping and mixing  
Up under our fingernails  
A secret salve  
Just like any other  
Living simple  
And keeping to our proud selves  
Quite aware of night riders  
Quite aware of men with  
Politicious smiles  
Cologned with kerosene and match

Aware of just whose feet  
Walked across our tin roofs at night

We were such light sleepers  
Such long distance believers

We were a family pregnant  
Whose water had broke  
And for once there was ham money  
'Bacca money  
So we thought to do better by ourselves  
To begin our next row  
We would go and get him  
Because he was medically degreed in baby bringing  
Because he was young and white and handsome  
And because of that  
Had been neighbor to more knowledge  
Than us way back behind  
The country's proud but inferior lines

And because he came with his papers in his pocket  
So convincing so soon  
After his ivy graduation  
Asking us hadn't we heard  
Telling us times had changed

And the midwife wasn't safe anymore  
Even though we had all been caught  
By tried and true Black Grannies  
Who lay ax blade sharp side up  
And water pan underneath the bed  
To cut the pain  
To cool the fever

We were a Pregnant Clan of Kinfolk  
Caught with water running down our legs  
Old family say they remember  
Going to fetch him  
Telling him that it was time  
That he should come now  
But he didn't show right away  
Not right away  
But came when he wanted  
The next day  
After his breakfast

But what more  
Could we colored country folk ever want  
Even if we had to watch the road all night for him  
Even if we had to not let her push too hard  
When he finally came  
He had his papers on him  
Something with one of those pretty shiny seals  
Old family say they can remember  
Somethin' just wasn't right  
But we opened the screen for him anyway  
Trusting  
And tendering close what the Good Book  
Had told us all our lives to do

Then we made him a path  
Where he put his hand up then inside  
My grandmother's womb  
Her precious private pleasing place  
Somewhere he probably didn't want to touch

Then he pulled my daddy through  
Somebody he probably didn't care to reach for  
And from the first he pulled him wrong  
And wrong  
Shattered his collarbone  
And snapped his soft baby foot in half  
And smashed the cartilage in his infant hand

Wringing  
Their own sun baked arms

Old timey family  
Remember him well  
Say they knew somethin' wasn't right  
As he came through the door  
A day later  
His breakfast digested now  
Somethin' just wasn't right  
How he had two waters on him  
One sweet one sour-mash  
One trying to throw snow quilt over the other  
As he un-carefully  
As drunkenly  
He with his papers on him still  
Stood there turning a brown baby into blue  
Un-magically  
And right before our eyes

Hope and Pray  
Hope and Pray

Then he packed his bag and left  
With all of his official training  
And gathered up gold stars left  
The Virginia land of Cumberland County

He left and forgot  
He left and didn't remember  
The afterbirth inside  
Carlene Godwin Finney

To clabber  
Gangrene  
Close down  
Her place  
Her precious private pleasing place  
To fill the house to the rafters  
Up past the dimpled tin roof  
With a rotting smell  
That stayed for nine days  
That mortgaged a room  
In our memories  
And did not die with her

We were a Brown and Pregnant Family  
And he would've remembered his schoolin'  
And left his bottle  
Recollected his manners  
And brought his right mind  
Had another klan called him to their bedside  
He would've come right away

He would've never had liquor on his breath  
If the color of my daddy's broken limbs  
Had matched the color of his own but

We were a Colored Clan of Kinfolk  
We should've met him at the door  
Should've told him *lean first* into the rusty screen  
Made him open up his mouth and blow  
Breathe out right there  
Into all of our brown and lined up faces  
In wait of his worthiness

Then just for good measure  
Should've made him blow once again  
Into Papa Josh's truth telling jar  
Just to be sure  
Should've let Mama Sally  
Then Aunt Nanny  
Then lastly Aunt Mary  
Give him the final once over  
And hold his sterile hands  
Down to the firelight to check  
Just like she checked our own every night  
Before supper  
Before we were allowed to sit  
At her very particular table

We could've let Aunt Ira clutch him by his chin  
Enter and leave through her eyes  
Just like how she came and went through us  
Everyday at her leisure

She would've took care to notice  
As she traveled all up and through him  
Any shaking any sweating  
And caught his incapable belligerent incompetence  
In time

Oh Jesus

We should've let Grandpop Robert  
Have him from the first  
Should've let him pick him up  
By the back of his pants  
And swirl him around  
Just like he picked us up  
And swirled us around  
Anytime he caught us lying or lazy  
Or being less than what we were

We should've let Grandpop  
Loose on him from the start  
And he would've held him up  
High eye to the sun  
And looked straight through him  
Just like he held us up  
And then we would have known first  
Like he always knew first  
And brought to us  
The very map of his heart  
Then we would have known  
Just what his intentions were  
With our Carlene

Before we knew his name  
Or cared about his many degrees  
Before he dared reach up then inside  
Our family's brown globe  
While we stood there  
Some of us throwing good black soil  
With one hand  
Some of us tending close  
The Good Book with the other  
Believing and trusting  
We were doing better  
By this one  
Standing there

Waterfalls running  
Screaming whitewater rapids

Down our pants legs  
Down our pantaloons  
To our many selves

All the while  
Praying hard  
That maybe we were wrong  
(please make us wrong)  
One hundred proof  
Smelled the same as  
Isopropyl

**Erecting Stones**  
**By Patricia Jabbeh Wesley**  
January 2013

Here, in Congo Town, I'm picking up debris  
from twenty years ago. Some remnants of bombs  
and missile splinters, old pieces of shells from  
the unknown past. A man strays into my yard,  
wanting my old range and a fridge some wartime  
squatters, passing through my home, did not take  
away these twenty-two years, while my home floated  
like a leaf, through the hands of mere strangers.  
He will build coal grills for sale, but it is in the trash  
that I'm searching for the past, searching for myself  
in the debris of years past, and here, the upper  
part of a cotton skirt suit, checkerboard fabric, black  
and beige, size six, yes, that's me, those many years  
ago, size six, high cheekbones, slender, sharp,  
the losses we must gather from only memory.  
But we're among the lucky, I tell myself as a former  
neighbor stares at me, the new neighborhood  
children, hollering around us. "I hear you're back,"  
my once lost neighbor says, staring in awe that after  
so long, we're still alive. "No we're not," I say.  
"We're only picking up the broken pieces of the years,  
erecting stones, so the future can live where we did not."  
"Thank you, Mrs. Wesley, for coming back to us,"  
he says. "We just buried Zayzay yesterday."  
"You're still burying dead, over twenty years, still  
digging and shoveling, to bury the young and early dead.  
This is a country of ghosts," I say, "a country of ghosts."



**Afterimages**  
**By Audre Lorde**

I

However the image enters  
its force remains within  
my eyes  
rockstrewn caves where dragonfish evolve  
wild for life, relentless and acquisitive  
learning to survive  
where there is no food  
my eyes are always hungry  
and remembering  
however the image enters  
its force remains.  
A white woman stands bereft and empty  
a black boy hacked into a murderous lesson  
recalled in me forever  
like a lurch of earth on the edge of sleep  
etched into my visions  
food for dragonfish that learn  
to live upon whatever they must eat  
fused images beneath my pain.

II

The Pearl River floods through the streets of Jackson  
A Mississippi summer televised.  
Trapped houses kneel like sinners in the rain  
a white woman climbs from her roof to a passing boat  
her fingers tarry for a moment on the chimney  
now awash  
tearless and no longer young, she holds  
a tattered baby's blanket in her arms.  
In a flickering afterimage of the nightmare rain  
a microphone  
thrust up against her flat bewildered words  
    “we jest come from the bank yestiddy  
        borrowing money to pay the income tax  
        now everything's gone. I never knew  
        it could be so hard.”  
Despair weighs down her voice like Pearl River mud  
caked around the edges  
her pale eyes scanning the camera for help or explanation  
unanswered  
she shifts her search across the watered street, dry-eyed  
    “hard, but not this hard.”  
Two tow-headed children hurl themselves against her  
hanging upon her coat like mirrors  
until a man with ham-like hands pulls her aside  
snarling “She ain't got nothing more to say!”

and that lie hangs in his mouth  
like a shred of rotting meat.

III

I inherited Jackson, Mississippi.  
For my majority it gave me Emmett Till  
his 15 years puffed out like bruises  
on plump boy-cheeks  
his only Mississippi summer  
whistling a 21 gun salute to Dixie  
as a white girl passed him in the street  
and he was baptized my son forever  
in the midnight waters of the Pearl.

His broken body is the afterimage of my 21st year  
when I walked through a northern summer  
my eyes averted  
from each corner's photographies  
newspapers protest posters magazines  
Police Story, Confidential, True  
the avid insistence of detail  
pretending insight or information  
the length of gash across the dead boy's loins  
his grieving mother's lamentation  
the severed lips, how many burns  
his gouged out eyes  
sewed shut upon the screaming covers  
louder than life  
all over  
the veiled warning, the secret relish  
of a black child's mutilated body  
fingered by street-corner eyes  
bruise upon livid bruise  
and wherever I looked that summer  
I learned to be at home with children's blood  
with savored violence  
with pictures of black broken flesh  
used, crumpled, and discarded  
lying amid the sidewalk refuse  
like a raped woman's face.

A black boy from Chicago  
whistled on the streets of Jackson, Mississippi  
testing what he'd been taught was a manly thing to do  
his teachers  
ripped his eyes out his sex his tongue  
and flung him to the Pearl weighted with stone  
in the name of white womanhood  
they took their aroused honor  
back to Jackson



and celebrated in a whorehouse  
the double ritual of white manhood  
confirmed.

IV

“If earth and air and water do not judge them who are  
we to refuse a crust of bread?”

Emmett Till rides the crest of the Pearl, whistling  
24 years his ghost lay like the shade of a raped woman  
and a white girl has grown older in costly honor  
(what did she pay to never know its price?)  
now the Pearl River speaks its muddy judgment  
and I can withhold my pity and my bread.

“Hard, but not this hard.”  
Her face is flat with resignation and despair  
with ancient and familiar sorrows  
a woman surveying her crumpled future  
as the white girl besmirched by Emmett's whistle  
never allowed her own tongue  
without power or conclusion  
unvoiced  
she stands adrift in the ruins of her honor  
and a man with an executioner's face  
pulls her away.

Within my eyes  
the flickering afterimages of a nightmare rain  
a woman wrings her hands  
beneath the weight of agonies remembered  
I wade through summer ghosts  
betrayed by vision  
hers and my own  
becoming dragonfish to survive  
the horrors we are living  
with tortured lungs  
adapting to breathe blood.

A woman measures her life's damage  
my eyes are caves, chunks of etched rock  
tied to the ghost of a black boy  
whistling  
crying and frightened  
her tow-headed children cluster  
like little mirrors of despair  
their father's hands upon them  
and soundlessly  
a woman begins to weep.

**IV (from *A Wreath for Emmett Till*)  
By Marilyn Nelson**

Emmett Till's name still catches in my throat,  
like syllables waylaid in a stutterer's mouth.  
A fourteen-year-old stutterer, in the South  
to visit relatives and to be taught  
the family's ways. His mother had finally bought  
that White Sox cap; she'd made him swear an oath  
to be careful around white folks. She's told him the truth  
of many a Mississippi anecdote:  
Some white folks have blind souls. In his suitcase  
she'd packed dungarees, T-shirts, underwear,  
and comic books. She'd given him a note  
for the conductor, waved to his chubby face,  
wondered if he'd remember to brush his hair.  
Her only child. A body left to bloat.



**A Bronzeville Mother Loiters In Mississippi. Meanwhile, a  
Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon.**

**By Gwendolyn Brooks**

From the first it had been like a  
Ballad. It had the beat inevitable. It had the blood.  
A wildness cut up, and tied in little bunches,  
Like the four-line stanzas of the ballads she had never quite  
Understood—the ballads they had set her to, in school.

Herself: the milk-white maid, the "maid mild"  
Of the ballad. Pursued  
By the Dark Villain. Rescued by the Fine Prince.  
The Happiness-Ever-After.  
That was worth anything.  
It was good to be a "maid mild."  
That made the breath go fast.

Her bacon burned. She  
Hastened to hide it in the step-on can, and  
Drew more strips from the meat case. The eggs and sour-milk biscuits  
Did well. She set out a jar  
Of her new quince preserve.

. . . But there was something about the matter of the Dark Villain.  
He should have been older, perhaps.  
The hacking down of a villain was more fun to think about  
When his menace possessed undisputed breadth, undisputed height,  
And a harsh kind of vice.  
And best of all, when history was cluttered  
With the bones of many eaten knights and princesses.

The fun was disturbed, then all but nullified  
When the Dark Villain was a blackish child  
Of fourteen, with eyes still too young to be dirty,  
And a mouth too young to have lost every reminder  
Of its infant softness.

That boy must have been surprised! For  
These were grown-ups. Grown-ups were supposed to be wise.  
And the Fine Prince—and that other—so tall, so broad, so  
Grown! Perhaps the boy had never guessed  
That the trouble with grown-ups was that under the magnificent shell of adulthood, just under,  
Waited the baby full of tantrums.  
It occurred to her that there may have been something  
Ridiculous in the picture of the Fine Prince  
Rushing (rich with the breadth and height and  
Mature solidness whose lack, in the Dark Villain, was impressing her,

Confronting her more and more as this first day after the trial  
And acquittal wore on) rushing  
With his heavy companion to hack down (unhorsed)  
That little foe.  
So much had happened, she could not remember now what that foe had done  
Against her, or if anything had been done.  
The one thing in the world that she did know and knew  
With terrifying clarity was that her composition  
Had disintegrated. That, although the pattern prevailed,  
The breaks were everywhere. That she could think  
Of no thread capable of the necessary  
Sew-work.

She made the babies sit in their places at the table.  
Then, before calling Him, she hurried  
To the mirror with her comb and lipstick. It was necessary  
To be more beautiful than ever.  
The beautiful wife.  
For sometimes she fancied he looked at her as though  
Measuring her. As if he considered, Had she been worth It?  
Had *she* been worth the blood, the cramped cries, the little stirring bravado,  
The gradual dulling of those Negro eyes,  
The sudden, overwhelming *little-boyness* in that barn?  
Whatever she might feel or half-feel, the lipstick necessity was something apart. He must never  
conclude  
That she had not been worth It.

He sat down, the Fine Prince, and  
Began buttering a biscuit. He looked at his hands.  
He twisted in his chair, he scratched his nose.  
He glanced again, almost secretly, at his hands.  
More papers were in from the North, he mumbled. More maddening headlines.  
With their pepper-words, "bestiality," and "barbarism," and  
"Shocking."  
The half-sneers he had mastered for the trial worked across  
His sweet and pretty face.

What he'd like to do, he explained, was kill them all.  
The time lost. The unwanted fame.  
Still, it had been fun to show those intruders  
A thing or two. To show that snappy-eyed mother,  
That sassy, Northern, brown-black—

Nothing could stop Mississippi.  
He knew that. Big fella  
Knew that.  
And, what was so good, Mississippi knew that.  
Nothing and nothing could stop Mississippi.

They could send in their petitions, and scar  
Their newspapers with bleeding headlines. Their governors  
Could appeal to Washington . . .

"What I want," the older baby said, "is 'lasses on my jam."  
Whereupon the younger baby  
Picked up the molasses pitcher and threw  
The molasses in his brother's face. Instantly  
The Fine Prince leaned across the table and slapped  
The small and smiling criminal.

She did not speak. When the Hand  
Came down and away, and she could look at her child,  
At her baby-child,  
She could think only of blood.  
Surely her baby's cheek  
Had disappeared, and in its place, surely,  
Hung a heaviness, a lengthening red, a red that had no end.  
She shook her had. It was not true, of course.  
It was not true at all. The  
Child's face was as always, the  
Color of the paste in her paste-jar.

She left the table, to the tune of the children's lamentations, which were shriller  
Than ever. She  
Looked out of a window. She said not a word. *That*  
Was one of the new Somethings—  
The fear,  
Tying her as with iron.

Suddenly she felt his hands upon her. He had followed her  
To the window. The children were whimpering now.  
Such bits of tots. And she, their mother,  
Could not protect them. She looked at her shoulders, still  
Gripped in the claim of his hands. She tried, but could not resist the idea  
That a red ooze was seeping, spreading darkly, thickly, slowly,  
Over her white shoulders, her own shoulders,  
And over all of Earth and Mars.

He whispered something to her, did the Fine Prince, something  
About love, something about love and night and intention.  
She heard no hoof-beat of the horse and saw no flash of the shining steel.

He pulled her face around to meet  
His, and there it was, close close,  
For the first time in all those days and nights.  
His mouth, wet and red,  
So very, very, very red,

Closed over hers.

Then a sickness heaved within her. The courtroom Coca-Cola,  
The courtroom beer and hate and sweat and drone,  
Pushed like a wall against her. She wanted to bear it.  
But his mouth would not go away and neither would the  
Decapitated exclamation points in that Other Woman's eyes.

She did not scream.  
She stood there.  
But a hatred for him burst into glorious flower,  
And its perfume enclasped them—big,  
Bigger than all magnolias.

The last bleak news of the ballad.  
The rest of the rugged music.  
The last quatrain.

## Fieldwork

By Brenda Marie Osbey

In Commemoration of the Discovery of the Remains of 67 African Americans, Interred beyond  
the Walls of the University Cemetery, University of Virginia

*“that excluding students ... enslaved African Americans were the largest pre-Civil War  
population  
residing at the Academical Village.”*

remove topsoil  
cater close to the principle  
of uncovering both common and uncommon past  
monitor closely ensuing slow dig and soft-brushed stroke –  
now inherent tools of this body of knowledge intending to reveal  
whatever of human society remains  
to be revealed  
beneath  
below  
tin wood and brick  
ceramicware  
long anonymous cloth and bits of iron, nail  
spindle and spoon  
tooth  
quarry stone  
bone and shard  
men women children  
useful things  
of everyday life  
beneath  
beyond.

*cemetery* no doubt in other languages also  
is a graceful word  
death we know  
and sometimes causes, multiple causes of said deaths;



burial, means or styles of conveyance to places of burial of those  
dead.  
measuring proximity of bodies singly and adjacent or cutting one  
upon another  
tells something of various indicators of longtime burial practice  
in  
specific or approximate or conjectured place.  
cumulative patterns of expression and material culture of souls,  
however,  
is an area with which neither this present and ongoing study  
nor any science we yet know of  
claims so far to be equipped to deal.  
interviews with known or presumed descendants can perhaps  
expose  
basic knowledge of belief, practice  
concepts of death  
desire  
afterlife  
beyond.

slaves here are called servants  
many who write and talk such things do  
say that mr jefferson himself did call it so  
it does not change the conditions under which we labor  
within these bounds  
the uses we are put to  
the ways we die  
for keep of these grounds

did call himself *father* to all this we build and tend  
did look on slavery – they like to tell –  
as but one necessary evil.  
did not say the others –  
war mayhap

in our way it is as children gone with tetanus and pneumonia  
women gone birthing  
strapping men felled down in typhoid or the consumption:  
*violet, william and boy-bacchus*



*tessa's hannah*  
*vanalie smothered, sleeping – we all did hope –*  
*strong mike and billy*  
*tom young and handsome then bloated over with the filthy bile*  
*limas old but also here with us and not alone*  
*eliza and baby eliza almost together*  
*woman over broadus' place*  
*some over maupin and perrow way.*

*unknown* they write and put away in ledger and book  
*unknown*  
but not to those who love and tend them in the end  
not by us  
not by rust-red earth  
soft-brushed by hands that carry and tend  
and sometimes pray  
sometimes not.

as much science as we now possess  
it is yet difficult to advise beyond further study,  
determination for remains other than ancient bearing far more  
upon the living  
than we are at present  
prepared to suppose.

sixty-seven is no small number.  
nor is the body neither less nor more than the soul's own passage.  
for here some have the one-soul and others the many  
some return straightaway to ancestors  
while others live on even as the body itself gives way  
such knowledge comes in those earliest nights  
when living and dead go to meet one another  
go out of an evening  
to sit and talk *good* talk.  
these things are sacred.  
and it is worse than wicked to disturb those going to talk well with their own.  
grave evil to prevent them from keeping  
good company with their own dead.

in this place here is wickedness unimagined  
except to those  
who *have* no soul  
no dead to call home  
no ancestor to guide and receive them

sixty-seven is no small number  
and no one of us can make a home  
where ancestors do not also live.

it is well to consider  
that research design is one language,  
reverence another

it is well to consider  
how further study in concert with broader nearer communities  
than these esteemed colleagues  
may impinge upon the potential weight of disinterment  
of removing for analysis at this time  
remains largely anonymous  
yet long consigned

time to come  
drums yet may beat soft and low:  
tessa's hannah  
billy, strong mike  
*beat soft beat low*  
william  
tom, young and handsome still  
bacchus, violet  
*beat soft beat low*  
liza and baby liza  
old limas rooted deep as cypress close by  
surveying  
beyond what-all remains of this green  
embowered wood



sweet-sleeping vanalie waking only to dream again  
feast-days to come  
*beat soft beat low*  
the evils of this place hardly more than memory trailing  
and neither slave nor servant then  
but as we are  
in these our truest skins  
together  
soft now and low  
inside this silty red  
and clayey soil.



**Monticello House Tour**  
**By Kiki Petrosino**

What they never say is: Mr. Jefferson's still  
building. He's just using clear bricks now  
for his turrets & halls, for the balconies  
rounding his palace in transparent loops  
of dug air. After death, it's so easy  
to work. No one sees him go out  
from the Residence, his gloves full  
of quiet mortar. Mr. Jefferson's coat is narrow  
as daybreak. His long sleeves drag in the muck  
as he minces his turf. You know the room  
you were born in? It's part of the tour. Hundreds  
of rooms unfolding for miles, orchards alive  
in the parlor. Remember that gold chair you loved,  
the one with a face like a lion, especially  
in late winter, when Mother sat with you  
in her pink gown, humming? As it happens  
Mr. Jefferson built you that lion. He drew  
your time in prudent proportions. You have one  
job: to fit the design he keeps spinning.  
Your whole life is laced through a ring  
of similar finds. Look, it's all mothers  
in pink gowns, humming.

## Discourse on the Logic of Language By M. NourbeSe Philip

### Discourse on the Logic of Language

WHEN IT WAS BORN, THE MOTHER HELD HER NEWBORN CHILD CLOSE: SHE BEGAN THEN TO  
LICK IT ALL OVER, THE CHILD WHIMPERED A LITTLE, BUT AS THE MOTHER'S TONGUE  
MOVED FASTER AND STRONGER OVER ITS BODY, IT GREW SILENT – THE MOTHER TURNING  
IT THIS WAY AND THAT UNDER HER TONGUE, UNTIL SHE HAD TONGUED IT CLEAN OF

56

English  
is my mother tongue.  
A mother tongue is not  
not a foreign lan lan lang  
language  
/anguish  
anguish  
—a foreign anguish.  
English is  
my father tongue.  
A father tongue is  
a foreign language,  
therefore English is  
a foreign language  
not a mother tongue.  
What is my mother  
tongue  
my mammy tongue  
my mummy tongue  
my mommy tongue  
my modder tongue  
my ma tongue?  
I have no mother  
tongue  
no mother to tongue  
no tongue to mother  
to mother  
tongue  
me  
I must therefore be tongue  
dumb  
dumb-tongued  
dub-tongued  
damn dumb  
tongue

EDICT I  
Every owner of slaves  
shall, wherever possible,  
ensure that his slaves  
belong to as many ethno-  
linguistic groups as  
possible. If they can-  
not speak to each other,  
they cannot then foment  
rebellion and revolution.

Those parts of the brain chiefly responsible for speech are  
named after two learned nineteenth century doctors, the eponym-  
ous Doctors Wernicke and Broca respectively.

Dr. Broca believed the size of the brain determined intelligence; he devoted  
much of his time to 'proving' that white males of the Caucasian race had larger  
brains than, and where therefore superior to, women, Blacks and other peoples  
of colour.

Understanding and recognition of the spoken word takes  
place in Wernicke's area—the left temporal lobe, situated next to  
the auditory cortex; from there relevant information passes to  
Broca's area—situated in the left frontal cortex—which then  
forms the response and passes it on to the motor cortex. The  
motor cortex controls the muscles of speech.

57

THE MOTHER THEN PUT HER FINGERS INTO HER CHILD'S MOUTH—GENTLY FORCING IT OPEN;  
SHE TOUCHES HER TONGUE TO THE CHILD'S TONGUE, AND HOLDING THE TINY MOUTH OPEN,  
SHE BLOWS INTO IT—HARD. SHE WAS BLOWING WORDS—HER WORDS, HER MOTHER'S WORDS,  
THOSE OF HER MOTHER'S MOTHER, AND ALL THEIR MOTHERS BEFORE—INTO HER DAUGHTERS.

58

but I have  
a dumb tongue  
tongue dumb  
father tongue  
and english is  
my mother tongue  
is  
my father tongue  
is a foreign lan lan lang  
language  
Languish  
anguish  
a foreign anguish  
is english—  
another tongue  
my mother  
mummy  
mummy  
moder  
macer  
moder  
tongue  
mothertongue  
tongue mother  
tongue me  
mothertongue me  
mother me  
touch me  
with the tongue of your  
lan lan lang  
language  
Languish  
anguish  
english  
is a foreign anguish

EDICT II

*Every slave caught speak-  
ing his native language  
shall be severely pun-  
ished. Where necessary,  
removal of the tongue is  
recommended. The of-  
fending organ, when re-  
moved, should be hung  
on high in a central place,  
so that all may see and  
tremble.*

A tapering, blunt-tipped, muscular, soft and fleshy organ de-  
scribes  
(a) the penis.  
(b) the tongue.  
(c) neither of the above.  
(d) both of the above.

In man the tongue is  
(a) the principal organ of taste.  
(b) the principal organ of articulate speech.  
(c) the principal organ of oppression and exploitation.  
(d) all of the above.

The tongue  
(a) is an interwoven bundle of striated muscle running in three  
planes.  
(b) is fixed to the jawbone.  
(c) has an outer covering of a mucous membrane covered with  
papillae.  
(d) contains ten thousand taste buds, none of which is sensitive  
to the taste of foreign words.

Air is forced out of the lungs up the throat to the larynx where it  
causes the vocal cords to vibrate and create sound. The metamor-  
phosis from sound to intelligible word requires

- (a) the lip, tongue and jaw all working together.
- (b) a mother tongue.
- (c) the overseer's whip.
- (d) all of the above or none.

59



## 'Pages 1-4,' an excerpt from The Ferguson Report: An Erasure By Nicole Sealey

### REPORT SUMMARY

The Civil Rights Division of the United States Department of Justice opened its investigation of the Ferguson Police Department ("FPD") on September 4, 2014. This investigation was initiated under the pattern-or-practice provision of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, 42 U.S.C. § 14141; the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968, 42 U.S.C. § 3789d ("Safe Streets Act"); and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 42 U.S.C. § 2000d ("Title VI"). This investigation has revealed a pattern or practice of unlawful conduct within the Ferguson Police Department that violates the First, Fourth, and Fourteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution, and federal statutory law.

Over the course of the investigation, we interviewed City officials, including City Manager John Shaw, Mayor James Knowles, Chief of Police Thomas Jackson, Municipal Judge Ronald Broekmeyer, the Municipal Court Clerk, Ferguson's Finance Director, half of FPD's sworn officers, and others. We spent, collectively, approximately 100 person-days onsite in Ferguson. We participated in ride-alongs with on-duty officers; reviewed over 35,000 pages of police records as well as thousands of emails and other electronic material provided by the police department. Enlisting the assistance of statistical experts, we analyzed FPD's data on stops, searches, citations, and arrests, as well as data collected by the municipal court. We observed four separate sessions of Ferguson Municipal Court, interviewing dozens of people charged with local offenses, and we reviewed third-party studies regarding municipal court practices in Ferguson and St. Louis County more broadly. As in all of our investigations, we sought to engage the local community, conducting hundreds of in-person and telephone interviews of individuals who reside in Ferguson or who have had interactions with the police department. We contacted ten neighborhood associations and met with each group that responded to us, as well as several other community groups and advocacy organizations.

Throughout the investigation, we relied on two police chiefs who accompanied us to Ferguson and who themselves interviewed City and police officials, spoke with community members, and reviewed FPD policies and incident reports.

We thank the City officials and the rank-and-file officers who have cooperated with this investigation and provided us with insights into the operation of the police department, including the municipal court. Notwithstanding our findings about Ferguson's approach to law enforcement and the policing culture it creates, we found many Ferguson police officers and other City employees to be dedicated public servants striving each day to perform their duties lawfully and with respect for all members of the Ferguson community. The importance of their often-selfless work cannot be overstated.

We are also grateful to the many members of the Ferguson community who have met with us to share their experiences. It became clear during our many conversations with Ferguson residents from throughout the City that many residents, black and white, genuinely embrace Ferguson's diversity and want to reemerge from the events of recent months a truly inclusive, united community. This Report is intended to strengthen those efforts by recognizing the harms caused by Ferguson's law enforcement practices so that those harms can be better understood and overcome. Ferguson's law enforcement practices are shaped by the City's focus on revenue rather than by public safety needs. This emphasis on revenue has compromised the institutional character of Ferguson's police department, contributing to a pattern of unconstitutional policing, and has also shaped its municipal court, leading to procedures that raise due process concerns and inflict unnecessary harm on members of the Ferguson community. Further, Ferguson's police and municipal court practices both reflect and exacerbate existing racial bias, including racial stereotypes. Ferguson's own data establish clear racial disparities that adversely impact African Americans. The evidence shows that discriminatory intent is part of the reason for these disparities. Over time, Ferguson's police and municipal court practices have sown deep mistrust between part of the community and the police department, undermining law enforcement legitimacy among African Americans in particular.

### Focus on Generating Revenue

The City budgets for sizeable increases in municipal fines and fees each year, exhorts police and court staff to deliver those revenue increases, and closely monitors whether those increases are achieved. City officials routinely **urge** Chief Jackson to generate more revenue through enforcement. In March 2010, for instance, the City Finance Director wrote to Chief Jackson that “unless ticket writing ramps up significantly before the end of the year, it will be hard to significantly raise collections next year. . . . Given that we are looking at a substantial sales tax shortfall, it’s not an insignificant issue.” Similarly, in March 2013, the Finance Director wrote to the City Manager: “Court fees are anticipated to rise about 7.5%. I did ask the Chief if he thought the PD could deliver 10% increase. He indicated they could try.” The importance of focusing on revenue generation is communicated to FPD officers. Ferguson police officers from all ranks told us that revenue generation is stressed heavily within the police department, and that the message comes from City leadership. The evidence we reviewed supports this perception.

### Police Practices

—The City’s emphasis on revenue generation has a profound effect on FPD’s approach to law enforcement. Patrol assignments and schedules are geared toward aggressive enforcement of Ferguson’s municipal code, with insufficient thought given to whether enforcement strategies promote public safety or unnecessarily undermine community trust and cooperation. Officer evaluations and promotions depend to an inordinate degree on “productivity,” meaning the number of citations issued. Partly as a consequence of City and FPD priorities, many officers appear to see some residents, especially those who live in Ferguson’s predominantly African-American neighborhoods, less as constituents to be protected than as potential offenders and sources of revenue.

This culture within FPD influences officer activities in all areas of policing, beyond just ticketing. Officers expect and demand compliance even **w e**n they lack legal authority. They **are** inclined to interpret the exercise of free-speech rights as unlawful disobedience, **innocent** movements as physical threats, indications of mental or physical illness **as** belligerence. Police supervisors and leadership do too little to ensure that officers act in accordance with law and policy, and rarely respond meaningfully to civilian complaints of officer misconduct. The result is a pattern of stops without reasonable suspicion and arrests without probable cause in violation of the Fourth Amendment; infringement on free expression, as well as retaliation for protected expression, in violation of the First Amendment; and excessive force in violation of the Fourth Amendment. Even relatively routine misconduct by Ferguson police officers can have significant consequences for the people whose rights are violated. For example, in the **summer** of 2012, a 32-year-old African-American man sat in his car cooling off after playing **ba**sketball in a Ferguson public park. An officer pulled up behind the man’s car, blocking him in, and demanded the man’s Social Security number and identification. Without any cause, the officer accused the man of being a pedophile, referring to the presence of **children in the park** and ordered the man out of his car for a pat-down, although the officer had no **re**ason to believe the man was armed. The officer also asked to search the man’s car. The man objected, citing his constitutional rights. In response, the officer arrested the man, reportedly at gunpoint, charging him with eight violations of Ferguson’s municipal code. One charge, Making a False Declaration, was for initially providing **the short form of** his first **na**me (e.g., “Mike” instead of “Michael”), and **an** address which, **al**though legit **m e** was different from the one on his driver’s license. Another charge was for not wearing a seat **bel**t even though he was **se**ated in a parked car. The officer also charged the man both with having an expired operator’s license, and with having no operator’s license in his possession. The man told us that, because of these cl he lost his job as a contractor with the federal government that he had held for years.



### Municipal Court Practices

—Ferguson has allowed its focus on revenue-generation to fundamentally compromise the role of Ferguson's municipal court. The municipal court does not act as a neutral arbiter of the law or a check on unlawful police conduct. Instead, the court primarily uses its judicial authority as the means to compel the payment of fines and fees that advance the City's financial interests. This has led to court practices that violate the Fourteenth Amendment's due process and equal protection requirements. The court's practices also impose unnecessary harm, overwhelmingly on African-American individuals, and run counter to public safety.

—Most strikingly, the court issues municipal arrest warrants not on the basis of public safety needs, but rather as a routine response to missed court appearances and required fine payments. In 2013 alone, the court issued over 9,000 warrants on cases stemming in large part from minor violations such as parking infractions, traffic tickets, or housing code violations. Jail time would be considered far too harsh a penalty for the great majority of these code violations, yet Ferguson's municipal court routinely issues warrants for people to be arrested and incarcerated for failing to timely pay related fines and fees. Under state law, a failure to appear in municipal court on a traffic charge involving a moving violation also results in a license suspension. Ferguson has made this penalty even more onerous by only allowing the suspension to be lifted after payment of an owed fine is made in full. Further, until recently, Ferguson also added charges, fines, and fees for each missed appearance and payment. Many pending cases still include such charges that were imposed before the court recently eliminated them, making it as difficult as before for people to resolve these cases.

—The court imposes these severe penalties for missed appearances and payments even as several of the court's practices create unnecessary barriers to resolving a municipal violation. The court often fails to provide clear and accurate information regarding a person's charges or court obligations. And the court's fee assessment procedures do not adequately provide for a defendant to seek a fine reduction on account of financial incapacity or to seek alternatives to payment such as community service. City and court officials have adhered to these court practices despite acknowledging their needlessly harmful consequences. In August 2013, for example, one City Councilmember wrote to the City Manager, the Mayor, and other City officials lamenting the lack of a community service option and noted the benefits of such a program, including that it would "keep those people that simply don't have the money to pay their fines from constantly being arrested and going to jail, only to be released and do it all over again."

—Together, these court practices exacerbate the harm of Ferguson's unconstitutional police practices. They impose a particular hardship upon Ferguson's most vulnerable residents, especially upon those living in or near poverty. Minor offenses can generate crippling debts, result in jail time because of an inability to pay, and result in the loss of a driver's license, employment, or housing.

—We spoke, for example, with an African-American woman who has a still-pending case stemming from 2007, when, on a single occasion, she parked her car illegally. She received two citations and a \$151 fine, plus fees. The woman, who experienced financial difficulties and periods of homelessness over several years, was charged with seven Failure to Appear offenses for missing court dates or fine payments on her parking tickets between 2007 and 2010. For each Failure to Appear, the court issued an arrest warrant and imposed new fines and fees. From 2007 to 2014, the woman was arrested twice, spent six days in jail, and paid \$550 to the court for the events stemming from this single instance of illegal parking. Court records show that she **w**e attempted to make partial payments of \$25 and \$50, but **t**he court returned those payments, refusing to accept anything less than payment in full. One of those payments was later accepted, but only after the court's letter rejecting payment by **m**oney order was **s** returned as undeliverable. This woman is now making regular payments on the fine. As of December 2014, over seven years later, despite initially owing a \$151 fine and having already paid \$550, she still owed \$541.

### Racial Bias

—Ferguson's approach to law enforcement both reflects and reinforces racial bias, including stereotyping. The harms of Ferguson's police and court practices are **b**one **d**s disproportionately by African-Americans, and there is evidence that this is due in part to intentional discrimination on the basis of race.



basis of race:

—Ferguson's law enforcement practices overwhelmingly impact African-Americans. Data collected by the Ferguson Police Department from 2012 to 2014 shows that African-Americans account for 85% of vehicle stops, 90% of citations, and 93% of arrests made by FPD officers, despite comprising only 67% of Ferguson's population. African-Americans are more than twice as likely as white drivers to be searched during vehicle stops even after **controlling** for non-race-based variables such as the reason the vehicle stop was initiated, but are found in possession of contraband 26% less often than white drivers, suggesting officers are impermissibly considering race as a factor when determining whether to search. African-Americans are more likely to be cited and arrested following a stop regardless of why the stop was initiated and are more likely to receive multiple citations during a single incident. From 2012 to 2014, FPD issued **four** or more citations to African-Americans on 73 occasions, but issued four or more citations to non-African-Americans only twice. FPD appears to bring certain offenses almost exclusively against African-Americans. For example, from 2011 to 2013, African-Americans accounted for 95% of Manner of Walking in Roadway charges, and 94% of all Failure to Comply charges. Notably, with respect to speeding charges brought by FPD, the evidence shows not only that African-Americans are represented at disproportionately high rates overall, but also that the disparate impact of FPD's enforcement practices on African-Americans is 48% larger when citations are issued not on the basis of radar or laser, but by some other method, such as the officer's own visual assessment.

—These disparities are also present in FPD's use of force. Nearly 90% of documented force used by FPD officers was used against African-Americans. In every canine **bite** incident **for which** racial information is available, the person bitten was African American.

Municipal court practices like **w e** cause disproportionate harm to African-Americans. African-Americans are 68% less likely than others to have their cases dismissed by the court, and **are more likely to** have their cases last longer and result in more required court encounters. African-Americans are at least 50% more likely to have their cases lead to an arrest warrant, and accounted for 92% of cases in which an arrest warrant was issued by the Ferguson Municipal Court in 2013. Available data show that, of those actually arrested by FPD only **be** cause of an outstanding municipal warrant, 96% are African American.

Our investigation indicates that this disproportionate burden on African-Americans cannot be explained by any difference in the rate at which people of different races violate the law. Rather, our investigation has revealed that these disparities occur, at least in part, because of unlawful bias against and stereotypes about African-Americans. We have **found** substantial evidence of racial bias among **g** police and **ourt** staff **i** Ferguson. For exampl**e**, we discovered emails circula**t**ed by police supervisors and court staff that stereotype racial minorities as criminals, including one email that joked about an abortion by an African-American woman being a means of crime control.

**A Small Needful Fact**  
**By Ross Gay**

Is that Eric Garner worked  
for some time for the Parks and Rec.  
Horticultural Department, which means,  
perhaps, that with his very large hands,  
perhaps, in all likelihood,  
he put gently into the earth  
some plants which, most likely,  
some of them, in all likelihood,  
continue to grow, continue  
to do what such plants do, like house  
and feed small and necessary creatures,  
like being pleasant to touch and smell,  
like converting sunlight  
into food, like making it easier  
for us to breathe.



## **We Should Make A Documentary About Spades** **By Terrance Hayes**

And here is all we'll need: a card deck, quartets of sun people  
Of the sort found in black college dormitories, some vintage  
Music, indiscriminate spirits, fried chicken, some paper,

A writing utensil, and a bottomless Saturday. We should explore  
The origins of a derogatory word like *spade* as well as the word  
For feeling alone in polite company. And also the implications  
Of calling someone who is not your brother or sister,

Brother or Sister. So little is known of our past, we can imagine  
Damn near anything. When I say maybe slaves held Spades  
Tournaments on the anti-cruise ships bound for the Colonies,  
You say when our ancestors were cooped on those ships

They were not yet slaves. Our groundbreaking film should begin  
With a low-lit den in the Deep South and the deep fried voice  
Of somebody's grandmother holding smoke in her mouth  
As she says, "The two of Diamonds trumps the two of Spades

In my house." And at some point someone should tell the story  
Where Jesus and the devil are Spades partners traveling  
The juke joints of the 1930s. We could interview my uncle Junior  
And definitely your skinny cousin Mary and any black man

Sitting at a card table wearing shades. Who do you suppose  
Would win if Booker T and MLK were matched against Du Bois  
And Malcolm X in a game of Spades? You say don't talk  
Across the table. Pay attention to the suits being played.

The object of the game is to communicate invisibly  
With your teammate. I should concentrate. Do you suppose  
We are here because we are lonely in some acute diasporafied  
Way? This should be explored in our film about Spades.

Because it is one of the ways I am still learning what it is  
To be black, tonight I am ready to master Spades. Four players  
Bid a number of books. Each team adds the bids  
Of the two partners, and the total is the number of books

That team must try to win. Is that not right? This is a game  
That tests the boundary between mathematics and magic,  
If you ask me. A bid must be intuitive like the itchiness  
Of the your upper lip before you sip strange whiskey.

My mother did not drink, which is how I knew something  
Was wrong with her, but she held a dry spot at the table  
When couples came to play. It's a scene from my history,  
But this probably should not be mentioned in our documentary

About Spades. *Renegade* is akin to the word for the shame  
You feel watching someone else's humiliation. Slapping  
A card down must be as dramatic as hitting the face of a drum  
With your palm, not hitting the face of a drum with a drumstick.

You say there may be the sort of outrage induced  
By liquor, trash talk, and poor strategy, but it will fade  
The way a watermark left on a table by a cold glass fades.  
I suspect winning this sort of game makes you feel godly.

I'm good and ready for who ever we're playing  
Against tonight. I am trying to imagine our enemy.  
I know you are not my enemy. You say there are no enemies  
In Spades. Spades is a game our enemies do not play.

**Fish Fry**  
**By L. Renée**

Everything delicious is served on Friday.  
Jesus should get a do-over for the Last Supper,  
since He missed out on the miracle

that is Wonder Bread made paste by perch's  
corn-mealed skin sweating Crisco, clinging  
like faith to a mouth's roof, even as the tongue

tries to negotiate release, swat freedom for teeth.  
We know what delay tastes like.  
We have waited for a check that affords us

this feast of fish golden crisp and the glow of Black joy.  
With Luther Vandross praising us for being bad  
on Aunt Mary's 45 spinner, who would call this dinner?

Stove tops bubble with pots of kale and collards  
made sides only by smoked ham hock oozing  
salty fat, their doneness determined by Mama Joyce

who dips her Too Blessed 2 Be Stressed mug in the pot-  
liquor and sips slowly, purses her lush lips and declares:  
*It got more meldin to do. Ain't that true for all of us?*

She snorts every time Lil' Russell comes by to kiss her highest  
cheekbone, his jeans drifting toward hell like he forgot  
his real tribe. *Nevermind, no matter, we made it here together*

the Old Timers will say—though they suck their teeth at the sight  
of his drawers, at the sight of a Reneger at their Bid Whist table,  
at the scent of Dee Dee's too-sweet macaroni and cheese.

We all fall short of perfection like memory, but Uncle Harold  
brings us back to where we started: yellow perch biting their ashen  
end of a line in Lake Erie's Ohio waters—the place Granddaddy,



wearing his old mining boots, taught generations the patience  
needed to stay fed. Uncle Harold will never bring the tartar sauce  
Cousin Cathy, out East, developed a taste for. He will fling back his

James Brown-slicked bouffanted crown and howl the sound of hunting  
hounds choking on coal dust, remind her she still a West Virginia holler  
girl, remind us travels ain't useful without this knowing.



**Praise Song for the Day**  
**Elizabeth Alexander**

*A Poem for Barack Obama's Presidential Inauguration*

Each day we go about our business,  
walking past each other, catching each other's  
eyes or not, about to speak or speaking.

All about us is noise. All about us is  
noise and bramble, thorn and din, each  
one of our ancestors on our tongues.

Someone is stitching up a hem, darning  
a hole in a uniform, patching a tire,  
repairing the things in need of repair.

Someone is trying to make music somewhere,  
with a pair of wooden spoons on an oil drum,  
with cello, boom box, harmonica, voice.

A woman and her son wait for the bus.  
A farmer considers the changing sky.  
A teacher says, *Take out your pencils. Begin.*

We encounter each other in words, words  
spiny or smooth, whispered or declaimed,  
words to consider, reconsider.

We cross dirt roads and highways that mark  
the will of some one and then others, who said  
I need to see what's on the other side.

I know there's something better down the road.  
We need to find a place where we are safe.  
We walk into that which we cannot yet see.

Say it plain: that many have died for this day.  
Sing the names of the dead who brought us here,  
who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges,



picked the cotton and the lettuce, built  
brick by brick the glittering edifices  
they would then keep clean and work inside of.

Praise song for struggle, praise song for the day.  
Praise song for every hand-lettered sign,  
the figuring-it-out at kitchen tables.

Some live by *love thy neighbor as thyself*,  
others by *first do no harm or take no more  
than you need*. What if the mightiest word is love?

Love beyond marital, filial, national,  
love that casts a widening pool of light,  
love with no need to pre-empt grievance.

In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air,  
any thing can be made, any sentence begun.  
On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,

praise song for walking forward in that light.

**(Re)Dedication**  
**By Lauren K. Alleyne**

*JMU building rededication ceremony in which names of Confederates were removed from campus buildings and replaced with the names of Black people who made important contributions to the university.*

*Sept. 24, 2021*

1.  
Beginnings have many doors—  
each an opening into time. A possibility.  
A name is a beginning. A name, too, is a door,  
and through it, so much can enter—  
the shame of a wrongheaded history,  
the unvanquished haints of injustice—  
the wrong note of it clanging an offkey anthem.  
And so, we must close some doors.  
And we must decide how to continue,  
which is to say, we choose how to begin again.

2.  
A decision is always a door.

3.  
Having journeyed  
Having surveyed and focus-grouped  
Having task-forced and debated  
Having soul-searched  
Having archived and unearthed  
Having conferred and moral-compass-calibrated  
Having motioned and seconded  
Having voted: yes, yes, yes  
Here we stand  
in this day of new names—  
*Darcus-Johnson, Gabbin, Harper Allen-Lee*  
—in this day of doors  
we are choosing to throw wide,  
to hold open in welcome. Here  
we stand in the presence of their possibilities,  
in this miracle of a moment  
in which we, having begun, begin.

