Embracing the Dream

It was one of those sticky late summer days

where everyone yearned for a pool

or a cone

and there I stood with my mom,

pressed into the uncomfortable crowd

elbow to elbow, sweat to sweat

and a woman’s voice said,

*‘Tell them about the dream, Martin.’*

His voice was rich, full and musical

It lingered in the air the way

Georgia moss hangs ghostly from tree limbs.

He painted images of a world where

white kids like me and black kids

like those in the next town, our neighbors

could link arms like brothers and sisters.

But I didn’t understand the world

we lived in yet.

I didn’t know what they went through

over in Newark;

I knew my suburban world .

I knew my bike, my toys, my friends.

My mom’s mystery friends—

the ladies she’d bring home—

scared, sick ladies. Green-gilled

with hands over bellies.

Ladies who’s eyes ran from yours when introduced.

Ladies you didn’t ask too many questions of.

I didn’t know the world these ladies came from

or snuck back to

patched up and relieved.

Five years later, he was shot down

like Malcolm X and Jack Kennedy before him

I knew then the great gift mom had given me that August day.

When a bullet struck Bobby my heart was sick.

I was old enough to see King’s dream in him.

For a while at school, each face was

a single drop of rain under a cloud

of emotion created by a decade of loss.

In mourning, but with a sense of pride

I joined our band in honoring him with a song

as a train carried his body to rest through our town.

I thought of all the hope we held in Bobby,

in is brother, in Dr. King—

all the hope those women had in my mother.

I embraced the dream she lived—

the dream she drug me out to learn about

one sweltering day in Washington.

*Lost in the Maddening Crowd*

Daddy say they kill a king last night

right up the street at the Loraine Motel.

Or is it that way? That way?

I can’t remember how to get home.

Jimmy was s’posed to come get me,

but he didn’t. Left me lost in this crazy.

I ain’t never seen grown-ups act like this.

I ain’t never seen daddy cry that way.

He say they killed a king last night.

Is it this way? That way?

Jimmy? Jimmy? Where you at?

Smoke turn eyes red as rage,

sting like hate words.

Choke the cries out your mouth.

We were teeterin’ the edge of giving up.

Now fallin’, fallin’, fallin’ over.

Is this the Judgement mama pray about?

Jimmy? Jimmy?! Jimmy, don’t leave me!

You gotta come get me!

Jimmy, where you at?!

I can’t see where I’m going!

We can’t see where we going!

Everybody lost sight of the

mountain top and the dream ‘cuz

daddy say they kill a king last night.

Crash!

Broken glass! Shattered Hope!

Fire is a monster, it roars and eats,

chases too!

It has great clawed fingers to bring

down buildings,

wipe out lives. Blow up dreams.

Oh God! Jimmy! Where you at?!

Where do I run to? Where do I run to?

Our neighborhood is a

volcano’s belly.

Pieces of us scattered all ‘round,

everybody fighting or crying,

should I be running or hiding?

Just sink here and fold into myself

till my brother come get me.

He ain’t dead, he ain’t hurt;

He comin’, he comin’

he coming to get me.

God, please send Jimmy! Come get me!

Come back! Where you at?

Jimmy! Big brother, come back!

*My City*

Mobtown’s eruption wasn’t

spontaneous,

a spark in the dark, it was

a slow burn, decades of racism,

like a black mold, that crept in

crevices of courts to

city government buildings,

a chasm of hopelessness

deepened by the sound of that

Memphis bullet

reverberated off the walls of our minds.

Crooked cops were the gas,

city corruption struck the match,

and when Martin fell,

flames rose up like mighty arms

enveloping my city.

The eerie orange glow of crackling fire,

breaking glass, screams, tears,

demands thrown up to the divine.

They came for my daddy

a leader

who could gather men

to fill the buckets

to put the fire out

but city water can’t extinguish

a century of pain

of living as a second class citizen

in the land of the so-called free.

Gloria’s Window

Crumbling, paint peeling,

glass standing between

yesterday and tomorrow--

I seen them stuff my childhood

Into a brown beer bottle

set it aflame and send it a-flying

I seen it

I seen it

go up in smoke,

glass between me and

an aging, white-framed city,

throbbing with rage,

like my heart beating the rhythms

of fear and freedom songs.

I seen it

It start slow

like old tree roots under concrete

I seen it

simmer then sizzle

bubble up, then boil than burn

I seen it blow, I seen it blow,

I seen it blow

when they refused her service,

then caught her foot in the door,

When they hung that boy like

a fish in his cell

When they got Malcolm, Martin,

Jack, Bobby

I seen it

I seen childhood spark turn dark

I seen teachers turn tail,

the river become a wall

The colored boys went rage-blind but me, no

I seen it

Through my white-framed window

crumbling, burning,

my safe place dying

like his heart hit by hate’s bullet

mixed up as southern scents of

flesh and magnolia.

I seen it

through the glass

of my white-framed window.

*The Trunk*

I had to leave New Orleans in the trunk of a car

after days of poking at Jim Crow.

They called us *zip dandy, agitators, yankees*

reported our checkerboard groove fest

in the hotel --

blacks and whites harmonizing like piano keys.

It was Fat Tuesday in the Big Easy,

but there's nothing easy about Civil Rights work, so

I had to leave New Orleans in the trunk of a car.

My hi-ho Silver moment wasn’t like

the ones on TV.

The Impala pulled up and

 legs swung over wrought iron balcony.

Thrown like Mardi Gras beads into a

 blanket of blackness.

The growl of the engine

 the bump bump boom

of the rocky ground, the hollow hum of the radio

ran over the hoot and holler of Klan

on our tails.

I was knocked around but safe,

tucked away in the Impala's arms.

I had to leave New Orleans in the trunk of the car,

because my last ride left its footprint on my psyche.

I was the passenger, my white friend, driving.

The fuzz pulled him out the window,

beat him bloody,

called him *kike* and kick, kick, kicked him.

Pulled our pixie-haired friend from the back,

beat her for “looking like a boy,”

made me watch and learn why a

Negro should never take a front seat.

I left New Orleans in the trunk of a car.

EBONY 1 (mature): What’s wrong, honey? You don’t look right. Like something just got free, let loose, bobbed up to the surface of your reality. Painful, putrid, unrelenting thoughts that won’t stay way, way in the deep down. Let it out, honey. What’s wrong?

*(daughter)*

*I didn’t know tired, Mama.*

*I mean your value, your talent, your possibilities,*

*they viewed through a kaleidoscope,*

*twisting you into a broken image*

*Distorting the dream like a circus mirror.*

*Mama, I didn’t know tired.*

*Spent, drained, threatened by violence*

*just for where you sat, learned, loved,*

*your worth shaded by the heavy hood of bigotry.*

*Mama, I’m sorry, I never knew tired.*

*Empty, too sick to rage or run,*

*bucket kicked over, poured out,*

*but never the less…you persisted.*

EBONY 1 (mature): Oh! So, you woke! Stretched out the kinks and looked up to the sun. Got a glimpse of the eclipse and it burned your eyes! Once woke, you can’t get tired. Too many generations of women – the enslaved, the church mothers, abolitionists, suffragists, survivors – there’s always been too many of them lifting me up for me to fall back. Because of them, I resist. In hope for you, I persist. But this stuff going on now, Honey, we’ve seen before. This ain’t nothing new. Marching is for young folks. We fought our fight and now it’s your turn. Everyone has that time they can claim, that time that won’t turn back, that moment when everything changed. What was it for you?

*DAUGHTER: The night the fuse blew.*

A Fuse Blew

A fuse blew the night we found out;

It was right before the rains came

beating on the glass panes

like fists, like heads on concrete.

A fuse blew the night we found out

so we sat in the dark, hot expanse

of a warehouse behind a coffeehouse.

Espresso and art energized the stage.

Sankofa was purple from passion and pain

Dustin took us there “all night and all day”

The Priestess struck us like lightning.

Soul Cry made you want to taste the rainbow.

Then a voice cried out from the darkened stage

It hid Tiger’s face like a hood.

*“Yo, I’m black as hell and I know y’all can’t see me!”*

No one can see a black boy

in the dark when the rains come.

No one can see a black boy

In the dark when the rains come,

No one can see a black boy

in the dark when the rains come.

No one can see a black boy

In the dark when the rains come!

and the night was as heavy and thick

as Shane’s poems are true.

Indeed, we heard it then

from lips that had just spit

the deepest wisdom,

A “Ghetto Issued” proclamation,

a herald to we, the scribes,

and we almost clapped

out of habit,

we almost snapped

out of habit—

we almost snapped out

because we had heard it then.

Smartphones buzzed

like black women on the back pew.

We shared a gasp, exchanged curses, questioned

the verdict.

*George Zimmerman: NOT guilty!*

*NOT GUILTY?!!!*

A fuse blew.