Greetings Alumni, Family, and Friends:

Whenever I listen to black music—songs flowing out of the African Diaspora—I think about how it has repeatedly been a clarion call for freedom and justice amidst unimaginable oppression. I think about how slaves—while working long hours in unforgiving, foreign fields in the antebellum South—raised their voice in song in the heat of the day, crying out “There’s a better day a comin’, Hallelujah!” I think about how scores of black men, women, and children determined to have their freedom marched from the backroad of Selma to the paved streets of Montgomery while singing “I ain’t gonna let nobody turn’ me round.” I think about how the lyrics of “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika”—a song of resistance coming out of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa—flowed from the lips of black children living in a society rooted in their degradation.

That’s not all.

When I ponder the profound words that black writers, poets, and speakers have written and spoken into existence through the ages, I think about how they have shaped cultures, defined movements, and liberated many a people.

(Continued on the next page)
I think about Frederick: “Power concedes nothing without demand.” I think about Sojourner: “Ain’t I a woman?” I think about Langston: “I, too, am America.” I think about Martin: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” I think about Maya: “And still I rise!” I think about Nelson: “The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.” I think about Angela: “We are never assured of justice without a fight.” I think about Barack: “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.” And I think about Maxine: “Reclaiming my time.”

Simply put, the black voice has never stopped being a light in the darkness. Even though the powers that be have repeatedly attempted to silence and suppress it, it has never backed down. It has never ceased to conjure hope in the midst of despair, joy in the midst of sorrow, and peace in the midst of turmoil. And whether or not it comes in the form of song, stories, or stand-up, it will never stop speaking to us: encouraging us to fight, admonishing us to love, and daring us to never give up.

We are living in very interesting times, to say the least. Inequality and injustice surround us. Racism and bigotry are flowing in steady streams from the upper echelons of American politics. Hope and progress seem to be growing more elusive by the hour. But no matter how discouraging times may get—no matter how dark the night may grow—the black voice will always be there calling us to dream, dance, and fight another day; it will always be there empowering us to pierce through the darkness. And we, as the Kuumba Singers of Harvard College, will forever be committed to celebrating it for what it truly is: a prophetic voice that has consistently been challenged but never defeated.

All the best,

Marcus Granderson

President, 2017-2018
Tributes to Dr. S. Allen Counter

Remembering Dr. S. Allen Counter: A True Harvard Treasure

The Kuumba Singers of Harvard College Executive Board

On July 12, 2017, Dr. S. Allen Counter, Harvard Medical School Professor of Neurology, Harvard Foundation Director, and Faculty Advisor to the Kuumba Singers of Harvard College, passed away after a brief illness. The 2017–2018 Executive Board of Kuumba, on behalf of all members of the Kuumba Singers of Harvard College, both past and present, would like to extend its deepest condolences to the Counter Family, as well as all those who knew Dr. Counter as a colleague, an adviser, a mentor, and a friend. You are all in our thoughts and prayers.

To fully appreciate the indelible impact Dr. Counter had on Kuumba, one must travel back to the early 1970’s, when racial tensions on Harvard’s campus, and around the country, were especially high. The Civil Rights Movement was waning, the Black Power movement was peaking, and black students on Harvard’s campus were searching for safe spaces where they could fully and freely express their blackness without fear of critique or ridicule.

Amidst all this unrest and change, Dr. Counter came to Harvard in 1970 to serve as a postdoctoral fellow and assistant neurophysiologist at Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital. As he served in these roles, he integrated himself into campus life as a live-in dormitory directory, resident tutor, and biological sciences tutor. This early commitment to enriching the lives of students foreshadowed the integral role Dr. Counter would come to play in the lives of countless students, particularly students of color, throughout his time at Harvard.

Less than a year after Dr. Counter came to Harvard, a group of Black students came together to create a safe space where they could engage in the radical act of Black self-love, and celebrate Black creativity and spirituality in all its forms. This newly found group, the Kuumba Singers of Harvard College, immediately became a source of strength and community for all who joined it. And when Mr. Robert Winfrey was tasked with leading the choir after the departure of Kuumba’s first director, Rev. Hubert Walters, in 1971, he immediately looked for Harvard faculty members who could provide resources and guidance to the choir when necessary. Dr. Counter, as Mr. Winfrey fondly recalls, quickly became one of those reliable sources of inspiration and assistance.

When Mr. Winfrey was preparing to retire as Kuumba’s director in 1997, he strongly encouraged the students to rename Kuumba’s “classic” events—the Black Arts Festival, the spring concert, and the winter concert—in honor of three men who had been integral to Kuumba’s effort to become an “important cultural entity on campus”: Walter J. Leonard (The Walter J. Leonard Black Arts Festival), Dean Archie C. Epps (The Dean Archie C. Epps Spring Concert), and Dr. S. Allen Counter (The Dr. S. Allen Counter Christmas Concert). In renaming Kuumba’s hallmark events in honor of these great men who have now all passed away, Mr. Winfrey felt that Kuumba could ensure they would always be “remembered by what they did for the Kuumba Singers.”

Without a doubt, Dr. Counter will be remembered—by multiple generations of Kuumba members—for being many things to the choir: a generous patron, an invaluable adviser, a fierce advocate, and a true friend.
Remembering Dr. S. Allen Counter (cont'd)

As Haven Jones ’15 (President ’14-’15) so rightly said in a reflection email she shared with us just days after his death, Dr. Counter “valued our community, our art, and our unabashed celebration of black culture, and he was not shy about it at all.” He truly was Kuumba’s “biggest champion at Harvard,” as LeShae Henderson ’16 (President ’15-’16) said while reflecting on Dr. Counter’s relationship with Kuumba. It was Dr. Counter who made it possible for Kuumba to perform at Nelson Mandela’s honorary degree ceremony in 1998, and interact with other important cultural figures when they came to campus. Without Dr. Counter’s efforts, many of the incredible experiences Kuumba has had the honor of having throughout the years would simply not have happened.

Ultimately, as we think about Dr. Counter’s life, we are reminded of the iconic way he used to talk about the choir when introducing us to audiences at ceremonies and events. He would almost always refer to Kuumba as “the gem of Harvard” or “a true Harvard treasure.” As we survey Dr. Counter’s distinguished legacy as a world explorer, renowned scholar, trusted advisor, and vocal supporter of black arts, we can’t help but conclude that Dr. Counter was the real “gem of Harvard.” He was the “true Harvard treasure”—and he will be terribly missed.

Anonymous

Dear Black Harvard,

Since you were big enough to walk on your feet and utter the word “community,” He was there
Since the community called for a Foundation here at Harvard, He was there
Since we were chanting, “I, Too Am Harvard” and “Black Lives Matter,” He was there

He was there as more than a black body wrapped in bureaucracy
He was there as unapologetically Black
He was there as a social justice warrior and a Harvard-bred scholar

I don’t think there’s a cue to be emotional. You are doing what you gotta do without him. Be there for your siblings and show real love and support. Take it a day at a time and I’m sure you’ll be fine. Your life is forever changed and it’s a lot to take in…

Photo by Y. Kit Wu
Ephemeral Moments; Lasting Impressions:
A Tribute to Dr. S. Allen Counter

Pamela Adaugo Nwakanma, PhD Candidate, Government

I met him in the last two years of his life
Of course I was not aware of this fact at the time
However, later realizations highlight past impressions
One may not always know another personally
But one brief moment of direct connection
Within many moments of collective engagement
Can lead to an eternity of appreciation

Whenever I passed by Dr. Counter around Harvard’s campus, I always said “Hi Dr. Counter”, even though I knew he didn’t know me. He always replied with a level of warmth as though he knew exactly who I was. This is my usual passing interaction with black faculty at Harvard.
On one of such encounters in Harvard Yard, I happened to be conversing with two pre-med students from Boston University. They were young black women. When I greeted Dr. Counter from afar, he stopped and walked towards us. Asked us who we were and when he learned of our professional aspirations and some of the nervousness the two undergraduates were facing, he encouraged them to apply to Harvard Medical School. He also encouraged me by talking about the ways in which my identity as a black woman was indeed a gift to Harvard.

After he walked away, I talked to the two young women about who Dr. Counter was, his work at Harvard and beyond. I also mentioned the fact that he didn’t actually know me, but that I learned of him through Kuumba. One of them asked me if he was a man of faith. I said I presume, but I do not know how he identifies spiritually. She said that there is no way that someone with such a genuine heart could not know the Lord.

There is a sort of kinship- a connection of sorts with people who have found kuumunity in the face of adversity. As a student of color on Harvard’s campus, I have been extremely blessed to have found multidimensional layers of support within kuumunities of belonging. Through his work as a scholar, mentor, and advisor, Dr. Counter left a legacy that promoted genuine kuumunity. A legacy that is admired and appreciated by many. However, through his humanity, he left an indelible impression on the soul.
if white supremacy and my salvation both come from the Bible
does that mean that there are two gods out there?
will my death advance both gospels?
will my soul travel to meet the god that is real
I have been thinking of Charlottesville
and all the Charlottesvilles that are still out there brewing
plotting race wars in the basement with Bibles AKs and a unified/united purpose
they like the body of christ are on one accord
they believe they are doing God's work and how can I argue with that?
this narrative is as old as America
so how do we fight a hate that has been growing since then
there are wolves in sheep's skin around us
hunting for the sight of blood not yet gushing
wanna Crispus Attucks us and send this nation into another revolution
    incite a protest trusting that it will be reduced to a trend
    rejoice when ppl denounce racism and walk away calling it a victory
for them that's winning
when the ppl scream for justice so hard and so long that they forget what they are screaming for
how can we continue to find hope in this vicious cycle of mourning?
is our hope a waiting game our ancestors played with no chance of winning?
it is us against an empire
an empire set on eradicating our hope
and if hope is lost
when I have kept faith in our/my God being a God of justice
it must beg the question
have I got the Gospel wrong?
or
has there been too much erasure to Scripture to resurrect its integrity?
we have not found an answer in a courtroom
or a sanctuary
so where else is there for justice to go?
my prayers are becoming questions marks replaced with periods
my hate is clenching my fist and I am having trouble giving it up to the cross
because if I let this anger rest what will i do when I have to face this other rage all around me
does victory always have to look like a massacre
is it possible to win without killing
will humanity's heart always look this broken
will one people's freedom always be connected to another's genocide?
Voices

Artist

Ata Amponsah ’19

I am not a poet.
A poet is someone who can
Paint pictures with the words they put to paper
and
Bring those pictures to life with their voice and
Arouse particular feelings in their audience
By deliberately choosing the words they use.
I try to get better at that
With every word—every line—every verse—
Every poem I write and speak into being.
With every time I write and every time I perform,
I come closer to a point where
I would call myself a poet or
Call the words I write and recite poetry—
But that point is not where I am now.

I didn’t write a line of poetry
Till I was eleven and in the sixth grade;
I couldn’t sing a note till I turned eight;
And I couldn’t play any instrument
Until I was nine and in the fourth grade.
Skill is different and harder to deny.
To write and recite and practice and perform
Are things I learned to do through repetition;
But to say I do those things well requires
Comparing myself to others who write
Poetry or make music. I see the ways
In which others who write and create and
Perform and I become aware of the
Heights I’ve yet to scale—heights I want to scale—
Heights I don’t know how to go about scaling.

If I’m honest with myself, my aversion
To the titles of “artist” and “poet”
And “singer” and “musician” have as much
To do with attitude as it does with
Talent. I could reach a point where I could
Do the things that compel me to call others
Artists—poets—singers—musicians—
But in all likelihood I still wouldn’t
Call myself by those names. That would require
A certain level of confidence in myself
And what I’d be capable of creating.
Maybe it’s because I haven’t gotten there,
But part of me feels like such confidence
Approaches the edge of arrogance
And if I ever did reach the point where
I’d call myself an artist, a poet
A singer, or a musician if I was
Someone else, I’d like to think I’d remain
Humble. But such a dilemma is
A good one to have, and I wouldn’t mind
Having it if it meant I could be proud
Of what I’d have become able to create.
Tori Scott '20

My first time playing a Black Woman

Tori Scott '20

I have been acting since middle school. I’ve been in ensemble and I’ve been a lead, I’ve done musicals and straight plays. I randomly decided to help someone on the BSA list with their TDM project, and this is the first time I have ever played an explicitly black woman as Nel in Sula. This 10 minute scene I only spent 3 days on gave me the opportunity to explore black womanhood in ways years of theatre never let me. I am so thankful to have had this experience and see the incomparable Toni Morrison’s story in a new light. It was something I didn't realize I was missing for so long.
Voices

Ihunanya

Pamela Adaugo Nwakanma, PhD Candidate, Government

My love is…
the God that resides within
Is love elusive?
My love is too wholesome to be suffocating
My love is too wise to be blind
My love is too holy to be ephemeral
Love has been scripted, spoken, re-enacted, sung and overdone
Yet we still struggle to understand it
Perhaps we are indeed spiritual beings that have struggled
have forgotten
have misunderstood
and overcomplicated what it means to have a human experience
A reconciliation of our spiritual selves with our full authentic human selves
might be the key to embodying the true, unadulterated love we seek
So, is love elusive?
Perhaps.
I remember the first moment you laid eyes on me
It felt different
Haunting almost to feel the heat of your gaze
Because I felt like I’d been there before
In that same space
With that same set of eyes and same sultry look

When you began to move closer
I chuckled because I thought I knew where this conversation was going
However you taught me that humanity is colorful beyond its skin
You taught me color exists in souls and speech too

We didn’t speak for a moment after you made your way to me
Allowing the clear force between us to exist peacefully
I appreciated you even more for that because
Silence is sometimes the best sheet music two souls can ever write together

You are the harp that I’d love to make music with
Those were the first words out of your mouth
And I must admit,
Even as a poet
I couldn’t hold the tinge of pink away from my cheeks
I respond
You can’t make music without learning your instrument first
Chuckling
With a slight twinkle in your eyes
I keep going

See making music is religious
How the strands are gently plucked
Or vigorously strummed
How the virtuoso’s head tilts slightly as the music carries them away
Or the soul etched in the sounds takes you away

I pause and search silently in your body language
Hoping to find understanding before I moved forward
Didn't you know
I am the realization of Gold
The words of respect and admiration laced into woman
I am the realization of Gold
Pieces and pieces strung together into the melodious instrument you are so interested in
I am the realization of Gold
The words of respect and admiration laced into woman
I am the actuality of Gold
I am the promise of Gold

You are the harp I'd love to make music with
Is the first thing you said to me
You've yet to prove that you're worthy of that right
Is the last thing I'll say to you
Voices

poesia dorsale

Gabriel Wadford '21

Background:
"Poesia dorsale" is Italian for "spine poetry" which involves making poetry using titles along the spines of books.

translation:

all the cold that i took
no one can bring a flower
and not even a regret.
the first night,
the wind passes.
a voice in the night,
"if not now, when?"
the dream of flying
life without me
The day my grandfather died, I woke up to silence.

A “bonjour” to my mom was greeted with a bowed head and more silence.

Already uneasy I was slowly brushing my teeth when the sobbing and shouting began. Mid-spit I ran downstairs and held her as the tears streamed down.

I held her and comforted her the best way I knew how- with clockwise circular motions and soft empty words of better places without suffering and pain
I held her and watched as my normally put together Mom fell apart in front of my eyes

“Check the corpse,” she shouted into her phone, “Ne le mets pas dans la morgue”

Ne le mets pas dans la morgue
Don't put him in the morgue
His breathing will start again

Said with the conviction of one who couldn’t imagine a world without
But simultaneously knew that the pictures on her phone
Of my grandfather's body
Cold
Lifeless
In the same fetal position that he started his life with
Said more than any word ever could

And when I put my head on her shoulder and let my tears start to fall out of her sight into the cotton of her shirt I know that I wasn’t crying for my grandfather.

I was crying for my mom’s father, my uncle’s father, my aunt’s father.

I was crying because the last time I saw my grandfather he had been a shell of himself.
I was crying because the stroke had turned him into somebody that made my mom cry at night when she thought I couldn’t hear her or notice her eyes tinged pink in the mornings.

I was crying for my mom’s first best friend.

I hugged my mom and hoped that with each hug I took a shard of her sadness, jagged and raw, into myself. I hugged her as tight as I could and watched her begin to clean.

And as she started pointing out to me the dusty areas and dishes that I could and should begin cleaning, I knew that the neat and smooth jigsaw pieces that made up my mom would never fit the same way again.
My sister had been straightening her hair for thirty minutes, and I was already envious watching her. Her curls seemed to relax into the hot comb, quickly falling into line. After each brush, the comb let out a satisfied sizzling sound, and the smell of hairspray wafted into the bedroom we shared. Straightening my hair, on the other hand, would be a three-hour war of attrition against all my kinks, knots and tangles.

“Tati can you hurry up,” I groaned. “I have to go too you know.”

Tati looked at me through the bathroom mirror and rolled her eyes.

“I can’t just hurry up. I’m going on a date.” Now it was my turn to roll my eyes. This was her third date this week, and she didn’t even seem to like the boy. But the boy liked her. All the boys liked Tati. Of course all the boys liked her. She was like a caramel-skinned goddess who blessed the world with sunshine and happiness. She laughed with everyone she met. She talked to anyone who would listen. Her eyes glowed when she smiled, and her skin glowed when she didn’t. Who wouldn’t want to go on three dates with a light skin goddess? My eyes darted between our two complexions and I let out a disgusted scoff. I was the darker sister.

Unlike Tati I was shy, nervous and alone. Maybe that’s why for the first twelve years of my life I was convinced I had been adopted. I had to be. I felt like an outsider in my own home. I was quieter, softer and weaker. It didn’t help that my hair was kinkier, my lips fuller and skin shinier. At first, I blamed the sun for my skin. When I was younger and didn’t know any better, I would play outside for hours—climbing trees, collecting rocks and basking in the fresh air. All the while Tati played dolls with the neighborhood girls and made biscuits with Mama. I was burnt by the sun while Tati was warmed with normalcy and adoration.

“Hey Chi!” Tati called. My head snapped to attention, and I hopped off my bed to see what she wanted.

“You can always come too if you want. John already told me he’s got a lotta friends asking for your number.”

“No he doesn’t,” I snapped back a little too fast. Tati put the hot comb down on the counter and turned to meet my distant gaze.

“Yes he does. Chi you’re so pretty.” I flinched when she said that. The words rolled off her tongue so easily. She was so used to saying it. She was so used to feeling it. But I wasn’t used to hearing it. I felt the heat from the comb grasp my face, and I stared at my hands hoping that would be the end of the conversation. But it wasn’t.

“Mama!” Tati beckoned. “Mama come here real quick, I’ve got a question to ask you.”

“Tati stop,” I pleaded. “I already said I don’t want to go out with you and John.” It was too late. My mother had already appeared in the bedroom doorway, her hands on her hips and her eyebrows raised.

“Whatcha want Tati?”

“Isn’t Chi pretty Ma?” My mother’s eyes settled on me, and she threw her hands up in exasperation.

“Girl, I told you! You needa blow that thing straight. Now your kitchen looks all broken in the back.”

“Yes ma’am.” I replied monotonously as my hands instinctively leaped to cover the back of my head.

“You can’t run around chasing boys and expectin’ this and that if your kitchen looks all broken and raggedy.”

“Mama!” Tati exclaimed, “Answer my question! Isn’t Chi pretty?”

“Why? You got boys runnin up here or something? Y’all know them boys don’t care if y’all are pretty or not. They only want one thing.” I stared down at the comb and tried to ignore the sinking feeling in my stomach.

“And they aren’t getting it Ma,” Tati said with her chin pointed up in the air. “I ain’t giving those boys nothing the good Lord doesn’t want me to give.” Mama smiled and stroked Tati’s hair. I was silent. I was tempted to walk out of the bathroom and sink into my bed. Anything to make their voices go away. I can’t run around chasin’ boys if my kitchen is a mess? I thought boys didn’t care if I was pretty or not Ma? Who says my kitchen is even a mess? Last time I checked Mama, we had different kitchens. I looked in the mirror and saw my reflection standing next to Tati. We weren’t that different. We both had the same fire in our eyes. We both had the same lightness in our voice. Tati was right. I could go out. I could have a good time. I didn’t have to blow out my kitchen. I didn’t have to go around chasing anyone.
The Darker Sister (cont'd)

I jumped when the doorbell rang. We were all still in the bathroom- Tati, Mama and I. As Tati scrambled to find her lip gloss she begged me to open the door and greet her date. I reluctantly stood from the bathroom floor, and went downstairs to welcome John. I opened the door slowly and looked out at the smug face that stood before me.

“Hey-um Is Tati home?” I nodded and forced myself to smile hoping to ease the awkward silence that stood between us.

John’s eyes studied me, searching for the right words to say. “What’s your name again? Sorry, you go to our school right?” My whole body felt numb. How could he not remember the seven years of classes we had had together? How could he not know who I was? If I had blown out my kitchen would he know my name? It felt like I was being burnt all over again. I stumbled to find the right words.

“Tati isn’t here yet. I mean she’s getting ready. But she’s home. I’ll get her.” John nodded slowly. I gently shut the door and bolted towards the stairs. As I approached our bedroom Tati emerged, looking like a queen. Just seeing her made my eyes fill with tears. She was pretty. Her kitchen was blown. People knew her name. I brushed past her on the stairs ignoring her questions and shaking off her invitations. I ran to the bathroom, shut the door and sunk to the floor. I sat there in the cold, hard stillness for what seemed like an eternity. Then I finally picked up the hot comb. I tugged the brush through my hair and tried not to flinch when I hit a tangle. With each kink the tears behind my eyes got stronger and with each pull I got weaker. I finally let it go. I let the heat from the hot comb burn me and my salty tears soothe me. The war of attrition against my kinks, knots and tangles had begun.

It was after midnight when Tati finally came home. The sound of her heels clacking up the stairs awoke me from the still darkness that had suspended my thoughts. I rolled onto my stomach and squeezed my eyes shut in hopes of protecting myself from the conversation I knew was coming. Tati’s steps became louder and her shoes seemed to shake the entire house. She did that on purpose, so Mama knew that she was home and that she hadn’t woken up next to some boy. I slowly let my body descend into the bed, mimicking a motionless slumber. Tati flicked on the lights. I suppressed a groan. I heard her shoes bounce off the floor as she flounced onto her bed. I followed her footsteps to the bathroom, where a low rumble of water erupted from the shower. Strange. _Wasn’t Tati going to tell me about the date? Why was she going to ruin her hair so quick?_ I shrugged off the thought and rolled onto my back, relieved that I wouldn’t have to mask envy and feign excitement. The shower clicked off a few moments later. _Good. She remembered her hair._ The lights flickered off. An eerie stillness hung in the air. I could finally go to sleep.

“Chi,” Tati hissed moments later. I didn’t respond.

“Chi!” Tati raised her voice a little, and I felt her lean closer to my bed. I flinched.

“Come on Chi, I know you’re awake.” I let out a sigh and turned to face her, but I decided not to give her the satisfaction of opening my eyes.

“Tati it’s late,” I moaned.

“I know Chi, but something happened.”

“What is it?”

“I think John wanted to have sex.”

My eyes shot open. I jolted forward and looked at my sister. Even in the darkness I could feel her nervous glance bouncing around the room.

“Did he say he that?”

“No.”

“Then how’d you know?”

“Well, he drove me around in circles for a while because he wanted me to listen to an album he liked. Then he pulled over really slowly, and his breathing went wacky.”
“Wacky how?”
“He started breathing hard. Then he played this real nice song and smiled. I started dancing because that’s what you do when someone plays a real nice song. And then he touched me.”
“Touched you how?”
“You know how!”
“Oh.” But I didn’t know how. I looked down at my bed. My mind was racing with questions, and my head began shaking back and forth trying to keep my thoughts from spilling out onto the bed sheets. I heard Tati sniffle and looked over at her. My eyes strained to find her, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t see her sadness; all I could feel was the curiosity boiling in the pit of my stomach.
“What happened after he touched you?”
“I asked him what the hell he thought he was doing, that’s what I did!”
“What’d he say?”
“He said he only wanted to have a little fun.”
“Oh.” Silence. Tati sniffled again.
“What did it feel like?”
Silence.
More sniffles.
“It was scary Chi. I didn’t want him to do that.”
“Oh.” I stared at my hands. I didn’t know a simple touch could be so scary. I wondered what it felt like to be touched by a boy. Not like a brush on the street or at school, not a tap on the shoulder, not a shake to ask you if your sister has a boyfriend- a touch. How could a touch be scary? Mama touched Tati all the time. She stroked her hair. She touched her face. She kissed her forehead. Touches are warm. Touches are love. Tati has always been touched. What was so scary now?
More sniffles. I wanted to move closer to Tati, I wanted to hug her and let her know it would be okay, but I didn’t want to scare her again. So I sat on my bed and decided to understand.
“Why Tati?”
“Why didn’t you want him to do that? He just wanted to show he loves you that’s all.”
Tati let out a soft gasp and then a low guttural sound.
“Love isn’t supposed to be scary Chi. That wasn’t love.”
“Oh.” I felt something wash over me. It started as a cold feeling in my toes but soon manifested itself as a warm anger wound tightly in my fists. How dare she tell me that wasn’t love. At least someone cares enough to touch her. I grunted, and crossed my arms.
“Why not?” I challenged.
“I just said why not! Because I didn’t want to. Love has got to work both ways.”
“I don’t understand why you’re fussin’ about. It’s not like you’re pregnant.”
“Don’t say that! I’m upset because I don’t love him!”
“Oh please! You don’t ever love nobody but somebody always lovin’ you. You’ve probably just gotten too much love you don’t recognize it anymore.”
“Shut up!”
“No! I’m not going to sit around here and hear you complain! You shut up!”
“I’m not complaining! You’re stupid if you think I’m complaining!”
“No you’re stupid Tati! Truth is this: you woke up next to some boy and now you’re mad about it because you used yourself up on the wrong option.”
“You shut your big mouth now!” Tati had sprung to her feet and was hovering over my bed, shaking her dainty hands frivolously. “Take it back! I didn’t wake up next to no boy!”
Voices

The Darker Sister (cont'd)

“I will not take it back! You slept with John! Even if it was a little early.”

Tati’s snarl pierced the air as her fist descended slowly and hit me square in the nose. Hard. It felt nothing like the touch of a boy.

“I hate you! No one is ever going to love your ugly black ass!”

My hands struggled to find my mattress as I fell. It felt like I was falling for an eternity. Falling away from my Tati. Falling into an endless abyss of silence. When Tati was certain I wasn’t going to stand up and hit her back, she peeled the sheets off her bed and lay down. My nose was throbbing. I was alone. I looked over at Tati’s bed, but I couldn’t see her anymore. I couldn’t feel her. She didn’t sniffle. She was gone.

“Tati,” I whispered.

No response.

“Tati, did he at least say he loved you?”

“You bitch,” she spat.

***

A stabbing ache in between my ears startled me awake the next morning. At first I tried to ignore it, but the pain quickly became unbearable. I stumbled out of bed to get some ice, stopping in the bathroom to grab my robe. I yanked the robe off the hook in one violent motion and turned around, only to have the bathroom mirror confront me in an unwanted standoff. My eyes shifted to the reflection of my nose. It looked all twisted and purple. I grunted and peered at Tati through the bathroom door. Why’d she have to hit me? Was she trying to make me uglier than I already felt? No one would ever love my ugly black ass now. I wondered how hard I’d have to hit Tati to get boys to not look over at her first. Probably hard. Probably repeatedly. First I’d take it out on her nose- just to settle the score- and then I’d move to her eyes because those would be really hard to mess up. I’d beat the twinkle out of them until all she could do is cry. A smile of satisfaction cracked between my lips- the plan sounded good to me. Then who’d be the ugly black ass? I looked over at Tati again and saw her hair flowing out of her scarf like some endless beautiful waterfall. Even if I beat Tati black and blue, she’d still have her delicious caramel skin and goddess-like hair. I looked at my own hair in the mirror. Ugly.

Sometime during the night my scarf had slipped off my head and my hair now looked like a violent mix between a dirty mop and a broken broom. I sighed and reached for the hot comb.

I managed to tuck away my plans of revenge, as I waited for the comb to heat up. Once the comb was warm I straightened my hair with a new kind of determination. I pulled it through the kinks lightly, hoping each tug would make me more beautiful than the last. My arms didn’t get tired. I didn’t accidently burn my ears. I ignored the comb’s rotten breath and nasty hiss. My eyes narrowed as I looked at Tati’s hair with hungry inspiration. I was going to turn my sad little stream into a beautiful waterfall.

Tati never woke up mad. But this morning she didn’t even acknowledge me. She strolled right past me in the bathroom and didn’t even warn me about holding the comb too close to my scalp. She grabbed her toothbrush and kept her distant gaze focused on herself through the bathroom mirror. After she was done she walked away with her chin in the air and her arms crossed. She didn’t even eat breakfast with me and Mama. She came downstairs with her bag slumped over her shoulder and announced that she was spending the rest of the weekend at her friend Allison’s house. She didn’t say goodbye. Mama looked confused but not troubled and asked me what that boy did to Tati. I fumbled with my grits and shrugged. The rest of the day felt empty. Without Tati home, Mama didn’t have a reason to walk past the hall closet into our room and talk. So I sat on my bed trying to understand why a touch wasn’t love. If a touch couldn’t make you feel warm inside what could? Why was it that the people who were touched the most never seemed to enjoy it? It was just love.

It was around eight when the doorbell rang. Only after the second ring did I remember that Tati wasn’t home to answer the door. It was probably for her anyway. I decided to let Mama open it. After the fourth ring I realized that Mama wasn’t going to give in and I trudged down the stairs to relieve my ears. On the fifth ring I swung open the door, and there stood John on our porch nervously rocking back and forth.
“Hi” he croaked. “Is Tati home? I have something I really need to tell her.” He kept his eyes on my feet the whole time. He looked like some ashamed little puppy dog with his tail tucked between his very toned legs. What was he so ashamed for? As far as I could tell he didn't do much. Suddenly I was struck with a surge of tenacity, and I stepped out onto the porch and closed the door.

“I don't think talking to Tati would be a very good idea right now John. But you can give the message to me.”

“That's okay. I can try and find her at school-”

“John, Tati told me she was never going to talk to you again. Like ever. If you have something you want to say to her you should probably say it to me.” John's eyes darted around nervously for a while until he finally looked back up at me.

“Okay.”

“Let's get off the porch before my Mama sees you.” We walked around to the back of the house and I took him to the “woods” I used to play in when I was younger. Once it was certain we were out of sight John stumbled to find the right words.

“You see, at first it was like a bet dare thing. Wait, no no don't tell her that. Tell her I never thought she would say yes when I asked her out. It was like something that my boys were telling me to do for a while. But then she said yes. And so we went out, and she was really nice and we were into each other. And people kept telling me that she was into deeper things. I didn't know she wasn't cool with it. I thought she was into that stuff. I just wanted to have a little fun...”

The more I listened to John the more his words began to blur together, and I felt a wave of understanding wash over me. I didn't have to be shy. If I wanted to know what it felt like to be loved I should let myself be touched. It was time I stop blaming people for something I should be able to get myself. And as John rambled on nervously, I realized he wasn't just a boy. He was a boy that could touch me. He could help me feel warm inside. Maybe the only way to be touched is to touch first. Maybe that's just what you have to do.

And with this new shaky confidence plastered upon my face I reached out and touched John's shoulder. He seemed a little startled at first, but I forced my voice to remain calm and soothing.

“It's okay John. You made a mistake.” I rubbed his shoulder and smiled. “How were you supposed to know that when your friends told you what Tati was into they were talking about the wrong Davis sister?”

“Oh. I-I had no idea.” John's eyes seemed to widen in both fear and wonder. But he didn't move back, he didn't look disgusted. I kept one hand on his shoulder and moved my other to his cheek. He exhaled softly as I touched his chin.

“Don't worry John. I only want to have fun too.”

He leaned closer to me and touched my arm. He touched me. I felt my body sink. For the first time I felt wanted. I felt needed. I felt warm. I felt pretty.

*Who was the ugly black ass now?*
If you want to know me

Read my poems about my grandmother
The way she raised five children as a widow
With only a primary school’s education to her name
The way she gets dressed in stockings because that’s what ladies do
The woman smiling from my lock screen
The woman probably clutching a rosary as we speak
The woman wearing floral dusters that match her late sister’s
Peeling ginger with shaking hands intimate with toil
She taught me to fold, told me to behave
She cannot leave me even when she’s gone

If you want to know me
Read my poems about my mother
The way a hurricane took her home
And alcohol took her father
The way she worked three siblings through education
And worked my last nerve editing essays beyond recognition
The way she mixes fruit cake by hand in a basin
And mixes Jesus into bedtime with her prayers
My mother buys things for her children that she would never buy herself
My mother makes hard work taste like water
She drives like she’s never known the comfort of punctuality
And loves as if nothing hurts

If you want to know me
Read my poems about my sister
The way she presses her freezing toes into the crook of my knee as I sleep
And leaves her wet towel on my side of the bed
The scenes she paints as gifts for anyone’s birthday
The debate speeches she writes for the teacher “with chapped lips”
My sister who loves to dance and so became a big ballerina
My sister who would do me a favor by helping me get dressed
Who thinks I am all the things a younger sister might want her older sister to be
My sister says that Facebook is for old people and nurtures our snapstreak like a child
She always wants craft supplies for Christmas
The most beautiful thing she makes is home
"Speak up, Little Black Girl!"

Keturah Gadson '21

Background:
The following submissions are a part of a larger project of mine entitled, “Speak up, Little Black Girl!” It is a set of memories about my growing consciousness into and exploration of race through exposure in schools. The work extends from daycare to present day, with the first piece here being the inaugural poem, and the last poem here being a continuation of my on-going exploration now in college.

“Shut up, Little Black Girl!”

Before I entered school, my parents tried to prepare me
   Keturah, you're black
I was offended, defensive
This was absurd
   My skin is not black, it's gold
Sun-kissed, sun-warmed, sun-loved, sun-adorned
Brown
   It's brown gold
But this is not what I was told

* * *

“Shut up, little black girl!”
A little black boy was staring at me
He’d said black and it felt derogatory
My daycare teacher chastised him for saying “shut up”
But I was perplexed
Was it not wrong how he had said black
Like that?
I felt attacked

I went home
I was torn
My parents were right
I had been warned
At school, they call me black
No matter what I shout back

But black people were not black
And white people were not white
So why did the world get to call me black
When my eyes promised me, my skin was brown gold?
"Speak up, Little Black Girl!" (cont'd)

Selma: Don’t you cry!

The world deceives itself (and you if not careful) into believing it an honor to be the “only” black person in a given space. It labels you an undeserving child of Affirmative Action. Ignores your burden, which it gave, to represent the weight of a whole race on your tired shoulders. Fails to empathize with your rage when all the emotions and cries of your ancestors well up in within you and struggle to break free into the very freedom that they fought and died for and you live and breathe—but you shackle them back down, you suppress, you choke them out. Because the last thing you will do is let the world watch you like an exhibit; let it think your ancestors’ cries are only for you and not for it too.

In twelfth grade, I was watching Selma with my AP Gov class. I was one of maybe two black kids in the room. Initially, I had been excited to watch Selma in class because it was one of my favorite movies. I had let myself forget.

We reached the scene where the four little girls and the church in Alabama were about to get bombed. Every time I watched Selma and tried to conceive the inhumanity that could bring one to hatefully kill children, tears poured out of my eyes from the aching in my soul. This time was no different. I could even almost feel a burning pressure—Eyes. My classmates’ eyes. Looking to me for my reaction.

“Don’t you cry, Keturah,” I commanded myself, “don’t let them see you cry.”

My tears left my eyes empty deserts, my emotions deserted my soul. Left in their place was a calm, but seething anger. How could they take my feelings from me? I wished I could watch Selma in a room all alone.

I removed my glasses and pretended there was something wrong with my eyelashes. For the rest of the film I watched the movie with a hand slightly blocking my face from my classmates’ view.

When the movie was over, a white student came up to me and said, “Were you crying?” The pleasure I heard in his voice made me so upset that I could only manage to say, “No, but you should’ve been. Selma is a movie for everyone, not just for me.”

Ballad of Birmingham
By Dudley Randall

(On the bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama, 1963)

“Mother dear, may I go downtown
Instead of out to play,
And march the streets of Birmingham
In a Freedom March today?”

“No, baby, no, you may not go,
For the dogs are fierce and wild,
And clubs and hoses, guns and jails
Aren’t good for a little child.”

“But, mother, I won’t be alone.
Other children will go with me,
And march the streets of Birmingham
To make our country free.”

“No, baby, no, you may not go,
For I fear those guns will fire.
But you may go to church instead
And sing in the children’s choir.”

She has combed and brushed her night-dark hair,
And bathed rose petal sweet,
And drawn white gloves on her small brown hands,
And white shoes on her feet.

The mother smiled to know her child
Was in the sacred place,
But that smile was the last smile
To come upon her face.

For when she heard the explosion,
Her eyes grew wet and wild.
She raced through the streets of Birmingham
Calling for her child.

She clawed through bits of glass and brick
Then lifted out a shoe.
“O, here’s the shoe my baby wore,
But, baby, where are you?”
Hyperpigmentation

We live in a society that calls what it perceives as excess melanin hyperpigmentation
By this logic, America is a hyperpigmented nation
That fundamentally looks at my skin and my very presence like a disease, an imperfection

* * *

For me, being a black woman in America is living everyday knowing from my transitioning hair to my dark joints and stretch marks that I’m imperfect
To daily look in the mirror and love my skin but know the world does not, prompting me to continually try and process what it even means to be beautiful, because beauty unrecognized or refused to be acknowledged feels invisible
To understand that to some my blackness is like that speck of stubborn dirt that won’t go away until it gives to the scraping up by the might of society

To be called pretty only to be followed by a conditional for ___ or not be called pretty at all
To understand dances and parties as festivities celebrating light and white women
To have my authentic voice start to pattern itself after others’ hateful words until I have lost my own native tongue
To have my voice shaken, broken, taken
To question as a child why I couldn’t be as white as the palm of my hands
My skin as even as my limbs when fully extended

To look at my ankles and know that when I was younger, I saw them as a hyperpigmented imperfection
Dark and blackened, they did not match my brown complexion
By some chain of events, this led to my mom rubbing white cream on them nightly
Like their color was a cancer that God had not intended
And it never helped
For who can erase the paint of God?
In my eyes I was permanently blemished
I did not see my dark ankles as an abundance rather than a mistake of melanin
Did not see the failure of my epidermis to homogenize as a testament to an essential resilience and uniqueness in my endurance as someone whom society calls black

My brown is beautiful as beautiful can be
Simply because it belongs to me
This is being a black woman--
Believing that if perfection is a reflection of how things were meant to be
Than I am in a sense of the word, perfect
My skin nor my presence in this nation are accidents of nature
Holding for my life to this I know to be true
That God created me lovely just the same as He created you
Wishing for your sake that you could see me
As desirable as anybody
Fearfully and wonderfully made
One of the infinite wonders of God’s world
That from my coily hair to my uneven skin, I am a mosaic of God’s inklings
From the soul in my voice to my full-lipped smile, I am part of His pride

God made me beautiful is what I now strive to own in every step, every coil, every cell of my being
Because when God looks at his body, the body of Christ, and sees me and my black and brown brothers and sisters
I know He does not see hyperpigmentation
But only [the] natural perfection [of His creation]
And it is very good!
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