

Against My Religion
For Clayton "Peg Leg" Bates

Each tap I tap
goes against the grain
of my Baptist upbringing,
Mama made it clear
thou does not dance
but unto the Lord,
The Holy Ghost sway
the only groove allowed,
but God speaks to me everywhere I go
the world thrums like a drum
through the rainfall
the railroad hum
the bird call
the hurried wind
the horse hoof
the hog call
the lake lap
the fire crack
the hand clap
the door slam
the thunder smack
Even with my left leg gone,
I don't despair, I dance
and delight on the streets
and in the barbershops
of Fountain Inn
to the circus
to minstrel shows
on the chitlin circuit
to Vaudeville to Broadway
to the first black man on The Ed Sullivan Show
twenty-times (but who's counting? Me)
to the silver screen
for the King and Queen
finally to land of my own
a Country Club in Kerhonkson.
I got one leg, but a whole story
and I'm here to tell it
and dance it against all odds.
God knows I dance not despite him
but because of him.
I don't hide my light
I magnify my gifts with riffs.

Chart My Trajectory

Some call me a fool dancing.
What do fault finders know?

Check the footwork.
I'm far from foolish

Every step I've ever took
has been part of my dancing mission.

Tapped my way out of Fountain Inn
through dusty mills and cotton fields.

Did not let the loss of a limb
keep me from my course.

A fool? Foolhardy maybe,
but foolish, nah.

I Invented the American Jet plane because
I Fly five feet through the air and stick the landing

Michael emulated me. I was the first to Moonwalk.
I was far out and out of sight.

I'm a standout in my tuxedo
matching my peg leg because I'm fly as I fly.

You gotta know. I stop the show.
I don't just touch the stars.

I am one. Everywhere I go.
I glow.

In Spades

Black Wealth is Black Love

Nikki Giovanni

Black love is a bed. Firm or soft.
Whatever it is, Black love is pure.
Struggle and Beauty both come in Spades.
You know what I mean, the card game.
We played every day 'cept Sunday. Mama's rule!

Black love is a table with us gathered 'round.
Partners picked. Rules set at the top.
Deuces wild. Both Jokers are in. Don't renig.
Yes, we know what it sounds like.
We Black as we want to be.
No talking across the board.

Shuffle the deck. Cut right. Deal left.
Talk is always trash.
If you can dish out,
you better be able to eat it.
With words and with books.

When the getting got good
Daddy plastered his next card to his forehead
three moves before.
Then, hack!
He made his spades
cut twice—
on the table
and everywhere else.

Don't get set
or go in the hole
You can dig your way out,
but you gotta have the hand.
Spades is life: like air like water like be all in.
We all play,
but everybody knows
ain't nobody playing.

Red Clay, as a Pulse

A red clay pulse
runs through me like a hum,
Like the story Mama tells
when she was little Nette.
Sent with a bucket and shovel
to fetch clean clay.
For her Mama and Aunts.

Clean dirt. Don't that beat all?
Where we came from
is riddled with contradictions.
She'd heap the lumps
and haul them home
to cut into bite-sized pieces
to bake and dry.
The clay turned their mouths red
as they munched on the chunks.
They hid the bounty
in flour sacks away
from little ones who, too,
had acquired the taste.
Was it iron-poor blood?
No one ever said, but the song does.
They say it was the blood.
They say it was the blood.
I know it was the blood for me.

Red clay, I crave you, too,
not to eat, but the sight,
your saturated color—
sinks into me every time I walk
or drive by an excavation site,
you stand me still in hunger.
your richness circles me
like a shawl everywhere.

High on the Hog on TV
flashes to the road of no return,
but I have returned. Keep returning.
The last land our ancestor's feet touched
before boarding slave ships. Red clay.
I feel a need, a dizzying deficiency,
but you calm me.

You circle my home like Mama's hug,
a bed of red clay and stone.

every bulb and seed I plant
produce bright blooms and emerald shoots
Everything I plant flourishes.
I become my foremothers—
not with thumbs,
but the greenest hands.
I sow and sew
their might to my own
with a perennial thread
I quilt, a living map
from what was meant
to unmake us.

How Nature Calls Me

Glazed eyes, I go into a poem
or into the woods
places no one can find me
except myself
amongst the wild.

Kwansabas for Living While Black

Start Here

Upon my diagnosis that I was dying,
I wanted to be amongst the living.
Doctors didn't order nature as a cure,
but my lungs craved crisp, clear air.
My face wanted to feel the sun
I traveled to Paris! Mountain, that is.
Every blade of grass helped me fight.

Even In Nature

The color lines were drawn back then.
Schools too. It's held in the name:
Fountain Inn Colored High School. My parent's
alma mater. Bull Dog's last class: 1954.
Mama recalls, "We went to Paris Mountain
for our Senior Class trip. I research.
Correct her. "You went to Pleasant Ridge."

How Yesterday Holds Today at Paris Mountain State Park

Blue sky above and the trail below.
We two go, not just for us.
At Lake Placid, we sit. I wonder
about elders and ancestors who couldn't
grace these grounds before. Laws: Whites only.
Grandson's hand in mine. We circle
as they hover. The past is present.

Tribute for Leroy Smith

First Black *Superintendent*
of Pleasant Ridge State Park

We all should know your name. As
you stood at the helm. You created
spaces for us when there were none.
Call this tribute a torch. Let these
words of praise keep your memory alive.
Let those who walk this trail feel
the fire of the trail you blazed.

At the Helm For Leroy Smith

Knowing that you called it your park
makes me feel that I knew you.
Your arms broad like your huge heart
wraps around the expanse of the land.
You came as one, but you stood
for the many. For us to gather
even now we're held by your embrace.

The Gift that Keeps on Giving

As Nikki Haley proclaims, There's no racism
in America, but here I am dying
from cancer. Numbers don't lie. Multiple Myeloma
strikes Black people twice as many as
White people. Pray tell, what is the
reason? I am literally living to know
what is killing us by the droves.

Wrong Road

I drove down Monument Avenue
every weekday while working
on a Ph.D. in Counseling Psych
at Virginia Commonwealth University
with my blood spinning.

Did my tires need to be re-balanced?
I veered left, and more left.
Or was it from the shots fired
From the Confederate War statues
that lined the avenue?
As I drove by, I felt hunted
in their sites.
I could hear the hate they mumbled.

I told my major advisor, Dr. Strong,
I was on the wrong road
literally and metaphorically.
I told him, "I did not want
to be in the program anymore."
"Pray tell. What do you want to do?" Poetry.
My admission, a chest punch,
I saw him flinch.
"You are one of those.
an artist just like my son at home."
I felt his dis-ease, but I heard my voice,
a raised fist for the first time.

As I drove back down Monument Avenue
with my poet's pen claimed. I took aim.
Felt and heard my ancestors' ululations
throughout the Shenandoah Valley.
I course-corrected with my hands firm upon the wheel.

