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Fabu

Madison, Wisconsin: Parallel Press, 2011

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Journey to Wisconsin: African American Life in Haiku



POETRY BY FABU

A Parallel Press Chapbook

Journey to Wisconsin: African American Life in Haiku

Poetry by
Fabu

Parallel Press

University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries

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University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries
728 State Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53706
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ISBN: 978-1-934795-24-8

“Rainbow,” “Early Morning,” “Boys,” and “Secrets”
were previously published in *Poems, Dreams and Roses*.

Cover: Nathaniel and Cynthia Owens, African American pioneers
from Baraboo, Wisconsin, 1905

This poetry is based on aspects of haiku with syllable changes.

I dedicate this poetry to all of the African Americans in Wisconsin who love this state. I hope that this is the beginning of telling your stories about your ancestors, free and enslaved, who contributed greatly to building Wisconsin.

Thank you to Mrs. Edith Lawrence Hilliard for allowing me to use your Owens family photo on the cover.

Edith Lawrence Hilliard:

My family's history is very important to me, and I trace us back seven generations in Wisconsin beginning with Nathaniel and Cynthia Owens. In 1996 I started a "Cousins Day" at my home on the third Saturday of each month from noon to 4 p.m. All my grandchildren attend and we have lunch, Bible study, family history discussion, journaling, and reading, as well as going to outside events together. We work to stay close and love each other well.

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Awoke with poetry
Caressing my curly naps
To come rise and write.

About Land and Loss: Africa to Wisconsin

A steady weep drips down inside
those forced from land and kin
a loss like cut roots dangling
shocked.

Those free in Africa
be slaves in America
Those with known names
called by strange English words.

One named Nathaniel
after the plantation master
other called Cynthia
after the plantation misses.

Replanted roughly in acid soil
they forgive the land
for not being home
while they drip, drip inside for lost family.

African plucked
Muscadine pickaninies*
Fruit in the new world.

Mississippi waters
Rise and overflow riverbeds
Shackled bones twist.

Arriving in chains
Winter blew death on us
In the colonies.

*Pickaninies: African retention word meaning *children* used during slavery.

Louisiana sky
Stretched out tightly
Like a dark neck.

Lynching rope swinging
Reason enough for running
Into Wisconsin snow.

Southern & Wisconsin
I hear the whistle blowing
Freedom inside of me.

Slaved then sharecropped
Migrated to the Midwest
Idle in Milwaukee.

Incongruous mix
Southern Black Americans
In pale Wisconsin.

Mere shadows moving
Is how whites don't see
Dark hued people.

Wrap faith around us
Button our culture tightly
Winter is white.

Southern in Wisconsin
Afromosia* smile
Frozen magnolia belle.

*Afromosia is a strong black West African hardwood resembling teak.

How We Love: Nathaniel and Cynthia

Nathaniel born in the heat of Louisiana spices
later grew up on Wisconsin's cold milk
taller, stronger, darker.

He was not alone in Baraboo, there were some
who looked like him, both slave and free.

Among the Quakers, God was gentle to all
skin color was not a sin.

Nathaniel was smiling on the sunny morning
he first saw Cynthia Roberts.

They courted with a tender love strained from loss.

Amaranth's ancient
Dusky fragrance hangs mid-air
Love-lies-bleeding.

Warming sun waits
For frozen bulbs to be touched
Woored into rising.

Frenzied bees
Flying between flower pistils
Pollinate which first?

Does loneliness sit
Or stand in fields of sweet grass
Hoping someone comes?

Hush all thoughts
Courting under a canopy
Of golden leaves.

1.

You stand on the bottom step
I glance back into your face
The crickets chirp.

2.

You wear an uncertain face
I am turned in answer
The wind breathes.

3.

Murmuring words
I can barely hear
The night closes between us.

Intimate breaths
Under magnolia trees
Quicken the petals.

Jumping the marriage broom
Slave man joins with slave woman
As dust rises.

Waves lap hidden places
Flowing in Flowing out
Taunting into release.

My head bobs
Upon its fragile neck
The weight of us.

Anger lays sandy
At the bottom, rising quickly
When stirred.

I bow my head
And sigh upon my hands
The sun burns my neck.

Words could fuse
Our souls together again
Tongues in mouths.

Our Men: Mr. Nate

Mr. Nate
your bones talking
bout your manhood secrets
survive and thrive.

Mr. Nate
your bones singing
your life in hymns
listen closely.

Mr. Nate
your bones counting
all seven generations
still in Wisconsin.

Mr. Nate
your bones praying
we not lose our way
and we remember.

Knew he was forever
Smelled chicken frying when
His lips tasted mine.

Onion and pepper hair
Hard lines season this face
Skillets bend to his will.

I feel simmering
In your rough thick hands
Fingers intertwined.

Down his wide back
Dreads hung like tree trunks
Wide, wild and wooly.

Redbone brother
Strawberry kool-aid mouth
Sensuality.

Blue Purple Gold
Etch the evening horizon
Through a jail window.

Our Women: Mrs. Cynthia

Were you Cindy
tottering on unsteady legs
as you learn to walk to Mama?

Were you Cindigirl
to your Daddy sneaking sweets
to his first born?

Were you Cynthia
when Nathaniel wooed you
in the Robert family parlor?

Were you gal
when you began to understand
black means disrespect?

Were you ever Mrs. Cynthia
even after 12 children, grey hair
and 70 years in Baraboo, Wisconsin?

Pine scents the night
Passion stirs the loins of men
Dark women sway.

Monthly red drawers
Menstrual evidence
Of aching within.

Buttocks *bambaming**
Tasty homemade jelly full
In canning jars.

*Based on an African American saying praising buttocks,
"It must be jelly cause jam don't shake like that."

Luxuriant belly
Stretched to hold the future
Creation's sacred seed.

Breeding then bleeding
Labor using stones
Babies fall breathless.

Midwife catches birthed
Life above ancestral straw
Resplendent cries.

Wool, herbs packed
Tightly into a womb
Stopping pain, stopping pleasure.

Raindrops spread silver
In circles like tears
From sad slave mothers.

Our Children: Nathaniel as a Boy

Little Louisiana boy
big dreams bulging in both pockets
searching for a way out of 1852 swamp water
Shreveport where freedom
is about skin color
no matter Nathaniel was born free.

Little Louisiana boy
taking a dream out his right pocket
at 12 hired as a cabin boy
on Captain Ephraim Hackett's ship
white Quaker from Wisconsin
with kind talk in his mouth.

Little Louisiana boy
dreaming of sailing the world wide
earning money to send home
growing up with the sea as friend
to one day settle down.

Only the dream changed direction
on a little Louisiana boy
when the Captain died suddenly
brother David came for two bodies
one dead and one young, small and black.

Nathaniel Owens from Baraboo, Wisconsin
never to see Shreveport, Louisiana again
taking a dream out his left pocket
he lived with the Hacketts, learned a trade
and married his sweet sugar Cynthia.

Nathaniel and Cynthia gave Wisconsin
twelve children, six girls and six boys
to start their legacy
and multiply his dreams
for generations to flourish.

Passion rushes by
On the wings of startled youth
Is there earth below?

Wild-hearted daughters
Run barefoot on glass strewn
Asphalt hot with heat.

Rainbow barrettes snap
Every which way, good kinkies
Escape to freedom.

Tell how she gon be
Straight when sexual abuse
Got her pretzel bent?

Musty underarms
Funky drawers hung low
Cept she ain't no man.

Boys colored by dusk
Bronze gold meshed
Volatile light and shade.

Early morning comes
A dog wanders with children
Playing with hunger.

Secrets stunt the growth
Of our next generation
Withering like weeds.

Our Worship: Let's Go to Church

Resting on church pews
pausing to give thanks, oh we give thanks
for our freedom
being able to marry
oh we give thanks
seeing twelve small heads who testify
that food is in their bellies
oh we give thanks
enough clothes, shoes and shelter
to take us through another winter.

Resting on church pews
pausing to give thanks, oh we give thanks
no more hard times
like down South
oh we give thanks
in hopes that family and friends
are still alive and have each other
oh we give thanks
because we could not do this by ourselves
You our Creator blessed us.

Rain falls outside
The stone built church
At the feet of Jesus.

Rain upon stones
Purifying, refreshing
Deliverance.

Patterns of sunlight
Criss-cross the darken sanctuary
The preacher moans.

Where do I find you
Oh Lord except in stillness?
My heart wrenches.

We enter worship
Ushered in by the Holy Spirit
Supernatural kiss.

Spirituals rise
Heaven bound from down below
The hymnal closes.

Sweet Jesus Christ
In my mouth on my tongue
Constant praise.

Sunday church ladies
Fragrant lotioned limbs flutter
Potent with female.

Church mother singing
About troubles she survived
Victory in every note.

God is rounded quiet
In the ebony rosary
My father fingers.

Do sins dim with age
Graying forgotten, fading
Hurt by hurt?

Faith is a skin
Sealing our spiritual self
Porous in release.

How We Eat: Garden Food

Feeding fourteen busy, hungry mouths
first our babies then ourselves
makes a man and woman be strong
with the hard, steady work it takes
to keep them growing and us alive.

We don't eat in shifts. All gather at the table
to say grace with the smallest babes in our laps
oldest chewing food soft before youngest gum it down
we say thanks for Mama Cynthia's hands
growing magic in our gardens, cooking with love.

Chicken resting
In a basin of water
Sunday begins.

Hot crispy cornbread
Garden collards and okra
My tongue tingles.

Slightly cooked okra
Boiled with a bit of salt
Sliding into me.

Sucking a ham bone
Is the essence of true love
Flavor from inside.

Juicy watermelon
Busted open in the patch
Swallowing stereotypes.

Gizzards fry tonight
All that's left stretching fullness
Belly to belly.

Vivid colors

Cook in pots, sun yellow corn, lime

Butterbean surprises.

The poet woman sleeps
With pen, paper and murmurs
Come words come.



I write to encourage, inspire, and remind.

Fabu is the third Madison Poet Laureate (2008–11). She is a graduate from the University of Memphis in Magazine Journalism and the University of Wisconsin–Madison in African Languages and Literature and Afro-American Studies. She serves the Madison community as a literary artist (poet and storyteller) and educator. As a literary artist, she creates and shares poetry reflecting her life spent in Memphis, Tennessee, Nairobi, Kenya, and Madison, Wisconsin. Her poetry has appeared in *Callaloo*, *PMS (Poems, Memoirs and Stories)*, *Southern Women's Review*, *Black Books Bulletin*, *The Wisconsin Academy Review*, *UMOJA* magazine, *Rosebud Magazine*, the *Madison Times*, the *Capital City Hues* and *Verse Wisconsin*. She is also a monthly columnist for the *Capital Times* and the *Capital City Hues* newspapers. She has studied under Sonia Sanchez and Dana Levine. *Poems, Dreams and Roses*, written for youth and young adults, was published in December 2009. Her website is www.artistfabu.com.

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ISBN 978-1-934795-24-8