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A Stillness Has Come

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A STILLNESS HAS COME
NANA AMA BUCKMAN

A DEPARTMENT HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE
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Introduction

Content

I grew up in a culture that valued, and still values, respect for elders. This respect comes in many forms but the way you show upmost respect to your family is to keep quiet about family “secrets;” I put secrets in quotes because these secrets are known by everybody but are just not discussed. My family “secret” is that my father has a second wife and three other children. I have known this since I was about five, so even my earliest memories of family gatherings include an awareness of this other family. I use poetry to give voice to the unspoken things that I have seen and been through. I am writing this because I want to take a stand against silence I want to give a voice to the memories that I have hidden in the deep crevices of my mind also I want to put into words the complex dynamics that make up the relationships in my family.

Form

The four voices are Me, Father, Mother and She, with “She” being the voice of the other woman. Earlier in the making of these poems I gave each of them a title and this proved to be quite difficult because I found that though the titles were okay they did not really add much to the reading of the poem. They felt artificial in that they tried to put a label to a feeling or a situation that was just not adequate for what I wanted to portray. I found that adding titles to the poems conveyed some ideas that I did not want attached to the poems. So I got rid of all the titles and just used the voices to show who was speaking. It gave the poems the raw and honest feel I was going for. For example, one called “Motion” was retitled “Father”

Father :

Your fair skin glittered

when you walked
and your shadow
cast metaphors on my thoughts
Subliminal friend of my youth
we talked about something
and everything

This thesis is based on a family dynamic, I explored voices that spoke mainly of betrayal and deception but there is an underlying current of love that runs through all the poems. I use a range of poetic forms including dramatic monologue, short lyrics, ghazals to tell a story. Making the poems more voice driven made my thesis more of a dialogue with the past and with other poetic forms. At first I wanted to reader to hear the voices in each poem speaking to each other without putting a label on their emotions thereby eliminating completely the semblance of any sort of title but when I begun working on the fifth voice I realized I could use my old titles to frame some of the things that the fifth voice brings to light. I did not want the fifth voice to differ too much from the other voices so I made it equally poetic. An example of what the fifth voice does is creating a sense of time and place, this is seen here,

Secrets: He meets her at the hour when the Sun meets the Moon. He tells her it is the right time.

She walks down dusty roads past leering men to meet him. In a secluded bar out of town their hands touch and stay. Who will tell this man that the hearts of his children are slowly turning to

stone?

The poems with the Father voice are told in the voice of a male, my father. I wanted to explore the situation from his point of view; I wanted to see what it was like for an adulterer. It was hard to not be biased but I had to give him the benefit of the doubt and honestly try and see this through his eyes. The Mother poems are told from the voice of my mother; there is a certain vulnerability I wanted to capture that I am not sure is conveyed. I wanted to see what it was like to be in a situation where one's partner cheated and I found myself feeling very favorable towards this voice and wrote many poems coming from this voice; it was the voice I identified with the most after my own. I found it was easier to **think** from the "She" point of view than I thought it would be, which I found very strange. Though I struggled to write from her voice, I found that I could imagine what it was like for her. It was truly a strange experience. I think my mind could logically understand what her point of view was but my "soul" where all my emotions were stored, and where I think my poetry comes from just, did not want to avail itself to this voice.

There were times I felt I should add a religious voice or a more religious tone to some of the poems since religion has played such an important role in the development of the story, but I changed my mind. I wanted the voices to be as unbiased as possible, to go past religious judgement or justification and just settle in the realm of pure emotion or sentiment.

Process

Poems force the poet to put into words experiences, memories and things that would otherwise have been forgotten. The condensed or compressed nature of poetry allows me to get to the essence or the heart of what I am feeling or experiencing, or what I perceived. If had

written this as a novel or even an essay I feel the nuances that make up the bulk of my thesis would be lost.

I started out this project with no clear structure in mind. I initially thought I wanted it to be several distinct separate poems, then I changed my mind and wanted it to be prose-like and tried to make it prose-like in order to tell a clear story. After much exploration and tinkering, it began to develop into a long poem driven by distinct voices.

One of my favorite poems in my thesis goes like this:

At the age of six
I could tie my shoelaces
Write a paragraph
And know when my
Father was lying

This poem I made short and used simple sentences because I wanted the heartbreak and disappointment that a six year old feels knowing her father is lying to her to sink in. I also made it short because my six year old mind was not continuously wondering why my father was lying or looking for an excuse so the poem did not need any explanations or complex metaphors. I was really going for a sense of “breeness” in the poems, because the situation has brought up so many complex feelings and experiences I wanted to write poems that showed the simple truth. Another that uses this minimal voice, in its entirety is this one:

She knew
He had
Been

With someone

Else

It did not matter

Although this poem is bare in a sense; having very few words, and no metaphors or hard ideas to grasp, it maintains layers of knowing. I see it as a poem that exposes a “a secret within a secret.” Because my thesis is so voice driven I wanted to create poems that represented different voices to expose and investigate these layers of understanding .This poem could be my mother talking about herself, me talking about my mother, or the other woman talking about herself. The poem represents the facade that the women in my family, including me, put up. But both I and the reader know that this deception matters, thereby breaking the facade and telling the truth without stating it exposing the irony of the final line. The voice sounds straightforward but in effect says so much more than what is on the surface.

My poems usually begin with one line or an idea that has been "floating" in my head. For this project I did not have a designated time to write; I found that designating time strictly to write seemed too forced. I realized that in almost every class I took I could find material for the poems in my thesis. It just took a striking sentence or an odd combination of words to set the ball rolling. I would write whatever I could from the sentence and then leave the poem for a bit, maybe a week or two before I came back to edit it. There were some poems that I had to leave for about two weeks or more because I just did not know what to do with them. Other poems I did not want to change at all. I used to write a lot of my drafts on paper but for a while now I find myself typing everything, I think with typing I lose a lot of material that could be used for other poems because I keep on revising and rewriting sentences as I type. I felt that I should go back to writing by hand, but I find that when I write I can't get the ideas on paper fast enough.

Inspirations/Poetic Influences

Whilst writing I have turned to a number of other poets I admire. Sharon Olds, and A. Van Jordan were my primary inspiration for the project. Sharon Olds' imagery is so striking yet her diction is in no way complex. Also, the subject matter of her poems focuses mainly on relationships-family relationships at that, subject matter which I am really interested in; the voices in her poems are so real and the topics very relatable. She talks about the mundane , the unappealing , the things we would wish to forget or avoid in our relationships with other people. I like this style of poetry because I find it seems to take a stand against silence- silence of the uncomfortable, silence of the mundane; her poetry gives the silent things a voice.

One of the first Sharon Olds poems I read was “My Father's Diary” from her book *The Father*. It ends with these lines:

Between the dark
legs of the capitals, moonlight, soft
tines of the printed letter gentled
apart, nectar drawn from serif, the
self of the grown boy pouring
out, the heart's charge, the fresh
man kneeling in pine-needle weave,
worshipping her. It was my father
good, it was my father grateful,
it was my father dead, who had left me
these small structures of his young brain—
he wanted me to know him, he wanted

someone to know him.

The structure of A. Van Jordan's poetry was very close to what I wanted to emulate in my thesis. His book *Macnolia* was exquisite in its rendition of the relationship between Macnolia and John. I liked the experimental nature of the book and the intimacy that permeates every poem was quite mind blowing. There is a certain vulnerability in Macnolia and John that I wanted to emulate in my own poems; the poems are very honest and the details that Van Jordan incorporates into his poems makes them very intimate and personal. I realized that *Macnolia* is also very much voice driven. I really enjoyed every poem in the book but the poem I kept coming back to was “Wedding Night”, and the stanza that I kept reading and re-reading was one by John where he says,

I don't know if I
have the words to touch the back
of your knees, the small
of your back...brown lines in your
palms ... what language can frame you? (30)

I liked the honesty and sense of vulnerability that the poem incites. Although the subject matter of my thesis focuses more on the betrayal of love than the feeling of being in love the sense of honesty and vulnerability apply to both situations, and I wanted to infuse that voice into my poems.

Cultural Influences

Drama provided a third inspiration, specifically Wole Soyinka's "Death and the King's Horseman." I fell in love with this play because of the poetic nature of the dialogue between the characters. I read it from time to time to just immerse myself in the imagery and language he uses. The play tells the story of the King's horseman (an African man) who has to kill himself when the king dies in order to join him and serve him the afterlife. His plans of suicide are thwarted by the white colonial powers present at the time. It is a tale of clashing cultures and ideas and Soyinka paints a truly beautiful portrait of the ignorance and presumptions of the white man, while the Africans in the play speak very eloquently dispelling the idea that they were uncouth. One of my favorite quotes in the play is by Elesin the lead character, and he says,

The moon has fed, a glow from its full stomach
fills the sky and air, but I cannot tell where is that gateway
through which I must pass. My faithful friends, let our
feet touch together this last time. (41)

Through Elesin, Soyinka talks about the taboo subject of suicide and its clash with white ideology on the subject. The clashing of cultures in this book relates to my thesis in the sense that I am talking about a subject that is still a taboo to talk about with certain members in my family, and I find that when I have told some people here in America about it they automatically jump on the defensive like the white people did in this play. Though I do not condone or accept what my father did, there is a cultural aspect of it which I grew up with that is totally lost on people not from my culture. Investigating the cultural aspect of my father's adultery led me to write a couple of "Africa" or "Black Consciousness" poems. These poems do not explicitly talk

about the adultery but merely echo and ground the reader in the fact that there are cultural influences behind the voices in my thesis. One such poem is;

Black, black skin
pigment of dirt and clay
molded in the light
in a kiln I burned
experienced heat
and tasted ashes
at birth

Since there are four main voices in this work, the voices change from poem to poem and there is very little said about place. But the fifth sub voice acts as a sort of narrator and operates in the realm of prose, grounding my poems in a specific place or situation.

Intent/Hopes

Almost every poem is based on a memory of a dream, a scene, a conversation, a feeling. I want to capture intangible things with words. There seems to be a façade I want to destroy pretensions I am tired of seeing and being a part of. I want the pain, hurt and confusion of a painful situation to be addressed and acknowledged. I find that writing these poems has been an awful experience sometimes, because when I sit down with myself and go through my mind sifting through the memories, the emotions associated with those memories surface. Though not as intense as before, they are still not pleasant. Paradoxically, writing these poems has been quite

cleansing and has made me more accepting of the fact that my parents made mistakes, and while their decisions did affect me, they do not define me: this was an “aha moments.”

Through my poetry, I also want to explore what reality is, as there seems to be two sorts of reality, the reality of what I see and the reality of what I feel or know. In my Asian Religions class we discussed a Taoist story about a cook who has learned to use his knife in such a way that whatever piece of meat he cuts he is able to remove every piece of flesh and expose a bone. This story is a good example of what I am trying to do with these poems; I want to expose the bare bone of the situation, get to the core, the essence of it. I want to strip away all the fat and skin and get to the heart of the matter, the marrow

Conclusion

It hit me one day that my whole act of writing this thesis, pouring out my memories, writing my family secrets so that I could fulfill my course requirements and graduate would be seen as taboo by some members of my family. I could have written about slavery or about the ex boyfriend I am still in love with or even about my cultural experiences in America. But that would be boring for me, that would be denying myself the opportunity to explore a situation that I have to admit has become a part of my identity. Through it I have learned to keep secrets; I have learned to smile the correct way when that obnoxiously rude family friend asks where my father is, or when that unknowing cousin asks if that other “Buckman” is a cousin too, I have learned to reply without malice “No, that is my brother”. I have been changed by these experiences and by writing about them.

I

There is a storm tonight. Like a splinter murmuring underneath skin, their voices wait. One will begin; the others will follow. The secrets will come out like scratches, clinging to semblances of time. They will speak.

Me:

I'm trying to speak
Of the secrets
That hide in the
Kisses of strangers
The secrets
That sleep in the sweat
Of the adulterers bed
The secrets
That slink out
Of the crevices that cover the
Hide of my master
The secrets
That manifest
In the dreams of castrated dogs
Let me speak

Me:

I would like to eat dirt
Have it fill me up
So i explode
And go back to the ground
To which i came
So that things make sense
I can go to the end of the earth and come back
And sleep under a grave
Feel bones and dance with caricatures
Of people i used to know
I would like to eat dirt
I have heard it tastes better than life

Me:

My parents hold little bottles of time
In their hands
I sometimes want to creep through the memories
That grow in their shadows
And light a fire
The heat would do us good
Some warmth
No tension
Or pretending
At six i could tell when they had fought
The red eyes and distant stance
Were not hard for my young eyes
It was there that i learnt the fine art of
Pretending

Me: Ghazal VI – My Father in his youth

He holds a candle through a window. Looking for a feeling.
He was told light brought warmth.

He looks at himself in a mirror. Reflections always lie.
He screams. Someone will hear and bring warmth.

He is broken. He is the light that will guide me home.
He has forgotten the meaning of warmth

He does not have to fall to pieces. Crushed glass never
Reflected light well. He wants to taste warmth.

He is called the one who does not want to be free.
“Homeless” they whisper. Gossip never brought warmth.

Me: Ghazal IV – My Mother in her Youth

The woman with the tears in her voice always wears red.
She started collecting her tears in shadows.

Black and white photographs wink as she walks past.
She always hid under shadows.

Never pour too much oil into soup her mother told her. It curls and moves
Looking to reflect your shadow.

She wears his shirts when he is gone. The cologne lingers.
He asked her to be absorbed in his shadow

She will miss her love most at midnight.
She will never find his shadow.

Me:

We were brought up
Not to air our family laundry
Brought up to smile
And pretend that
We had one mother
And one father
And no other brothers
Or sisters
I am tired of lying
Why should i sacrifice
To make the reason for
The problem
Comfortable?

Me: Ghazal V – Father

There is always a missed someone at the table. An empty space that is not filled.
We would like you to come home, Father.

Laughter bubbles and bursts from a content soul, but from the soul of the desolate it sleeps. It
stirs at the mention of the word, Father.

I do not have a breaking point, I have fortified this prison. But it will crumble at the sight of my
Father.

Pictures hold stagnant memories. Where do I plant my root? Like a fire I want to bring life to the
one I call Father.

Black soil is you, black skin is you. I search for the color within you. Why are you cold, man I
call my Father?

Me:

At the age of six
I could tie my shoelaces
Write a paragraph
And know when my
Father was lying

Me:

I was young
When i ruined my aunt's wedding.
The smell of confetti and expectation
Sweeping through the air
Was too much for me

I opened my mouth
And screamed till
My father came
A familiar large stable mound
Of softness

I clung to him and
Did not let go

Me:

When I was little and
My father emptied his pockets
The world tumbled out
Rivers and oceans
Trickled through
And fell into the palms of my hands
There was never candy
Never gum
Like in my mother's pockets
Just serious stuff
And even then I loved him
In his seriousness

Me:

When my father felt guilty he
Gave us money
He provided
I find it funny
That it never occurred to him
That love would have been
Enough
For us

Me:

All my uncles are polygamists
They needle through
Women like games
And display love
To affirm themselves
I do not understand them
But my father tells me it is
Possible for one man
To love more than
One woman

Me:

When my grandmother died
We kept the answering machine on
And my mother
Played Nana's voice
Over and over
So that we would not forget
What love sounded like
So that we would not forget
That feeling could travel
Through air by sound
And touch us
When my brother accidentally
Deleted the message
I had to be the voice that brought
Warmth to our home

Me:

My African mother has decided that my brother
Will not inherit the spirit that causes
Our fathers nature

She has taken him to a pastor
The blood of Christ has cleansed him
He will not be like our father

He will have one wife.
And one alone

Me:

For those children whose parents are never home

A party is a place to forget

The emptiness of not knowing

Who a father is

Or

Who a mother is

Their little hearts bleed

A little

When it is over and

They have to go home

In the eyes of children

A party is heaven

Colors flutter about in their little souls

As they dress in expectation

Me:

In my dreams
I understand
Why my father left my
Mother
I understand why my
Life seems to be
This cycle of
Pain and regret
In my dreams things make sense
I drink sunflower juice
With different men
And sleep under stars
In my dreams I smile
Whilst I scream
I need someone
To find my in between

Me:

I used to grow pecans
Just so I could bury them whole
Not crushed or cracked
I liked to imagine
They longed for the pressure
Of dirt against
Rough shell
I told myself
It reminded them of death
And birth
I liked to imagine they sung
My praises when I covered them up
And they remembered how it felt
To be close to what one came out of
Dirt
A womb
A mother

Me:

She knew

He had

Been

With someone

Else

It did not matter

II

Tears have no future. At twenty four she met him standing on the side of the road. The man with the afro and the gentle eyes. He spoke, she believed. The crumbling had begun.

Mother: Ghazal II – Musings

I wonder which part you are, which part of the soles of your feet
Could walk on earth and water to find me.

To love you is an acquired preoccupation, the dirt on your shoes
does not perturb the still waters in me.

Questions ask too much, I would like a joining of souls instead.
A mutual understanding would benefit me.

Hold me and remember little movements where hands met hands.
You always made little paintings of me.

I cut my hair for you, it fell in large clumps. We lived in houses of
smoke then. You always felt much closer to me.

Mother:

My life could be found in the palm of his hand

The nape of his neck

In everything that pertained to him

You could find me

Mother: Ghazal II

Promise by soles of your feet that in your drunkenness you did not love another.
I remember mornings with tea filled with sugar.

Listening to you calmly, an aroma takes over me.
I want to ask if you still taste like sugar.

Little children gravitate towards warmth, our daughter bites my arm gently.
She thinks it is made of sugar.

I am a woman in endless rifts of time. A terrible beauty.
I had dreams where chaos was made of sugar.

You used to pour light from your eyes when you saw me. Black clouds hover and sleep there
now. You were my sugar.

Mother:

Explain me

I want to know who I am

He loved me when I had no hair

He loved me during the periods

Between naps and the coming

Of children

He loved me then

He is all I am

Now he is gone

Explain who I am

To me now

Mother:

The crease on an elephants hide quivers
With tension that does not speak
In syllables.

Is that what you meant by love?

I was moving
Like a river
In which peace resides

Why can't you love me?

A river is calm
A river oozes blood
You are my river

Should I wait?

Silence is a chasm in the ocean
Your silence has left a chasm in my ocean

Mother:

You sit with your back to me
The bones poking a little through your thin top
It is white
The color we wore on our anniversary
The color of the lilies at our wedding
The color of the hospital gown
I had to wear after the miscarriage
That was so long ago
But I remember it now
Vividly
The hospital smell
The buzzing from the fan
The mumbling of the woman next to me
Calling her daughter
Her baby
I went again today
That hospital
And I am scared to tell you
They found a lump

Mother:

I have named a star after you
“Maximimus Scolinicus”
I wanted something grand
And large
So that when I lay on my back
And stared at the great darkness
I would see Maximus
And pretend he was you
That his twinkling and his glow
Were only for me
And for a while I would forget
That you had not touched me in weeks

Mother:

When we used to go out
You held my hand
I held yours
Our intimacy
Was sweet

Now I go alone
Replaying your excuses
In my head

I see other women and their
Husbands
Husbands who hold them
Husbands who have eyes only for them
And I remember you
Now and how you used to be

What did I do to deserve this?

Mother:

We acquired different things

In the span of twenty years

The blue shelf

The red sofa

The old armoire

The silver vase

My heart

Your heart

But now it seems

The only things

We kept

Are the

Inanimate

Objects

Mother:

Short "I" sounds

Short "I" sounds

Make no sense to me

There is no "I" anymore

There is a "We"

Say it, "ou-ee"

Your selfishness

Annoys me

III

Secrets: He meets her at the hour where the Sun meets the Moon. He tells her it is the right time. She walks down dusty roads and leering men to meet him. In a secluded bar out of town their hands touch and stay. Who will tell this man that the hearts of his children are slowly turning to stone?

Father:

He saw her cross the street
And knew something was going to change

And in that innocent way men think they behave
He tracked her down

She was thrill
She was ecstasy
She was what he needed

When they were together he forgot
About his wife
Forgot the promises he made her
Forgot his children

As he fathered other children
He did not feel guilt
Till he came home
To find his daughters weeping

Father:

The stars do not reveal the secrets I have told them
They know
She is beautiful when she is asleep

The darkness that hangs over my world
Hides my face in her arm
My mind wanders
Conjuring up images of another

Dark skin, brown eyes
A calm calamity brews
I reach out to touch her in my sleep
But she moves

Father:

I know that when you
Make our bed
You see the gap between
The indentations our bodies have made
And you know

I know that when
you do laundry
my clothes have a lingering scent
and you know

I know that when
you arrange my clothes
you realize they are getting less and less

I know that you know
That I am going to leave
Why don't you let me?

Father:

You want to touch me
Feel the blood moving
Under my skin
And get warmth from the
Heat emanating from me

You want to hold me
Feel my breath creeping up your neck
And settle just above your lips
To tickle you slowly

You want me to be close
For my hair to brush you face
And my fingers to gently caress
Your cheek

You want me
But I want another

Father:

It takes eternity and a day
To empty a house of never
I know because
I measured
I wish I could
Have all the money in the world
To make you smile like you did
The day you said you loved me
We lived in a closed knit tightness then
Now life
Has set us loose

Father:

When we lie down to sleep
I wait to hear your even breathing
I slowly turn towards you with my eyes closed
And just enjoy your body heat
I open my eyes and stare and stare
At the sculpted being that belongs to me
And in the rise and fall of your chest
I see the life that has become so intertwined with mine
I lightly touch your face, your hair
During this time my mind
Finds it hard to believe you are here
With me
I constantly see my imperfections
Made perfect
In your perfection

Father:

Your fair skin glittered
When you walked

And your shadow
Cast metaphors on my thoughts

Subliminal friend of my youth
We talked about something
And everything

IV

She is the one our people call the river child, the one who will forever wait. From times of old the river spirits have given children to pleading, barren mothers. There is an emptiness about the river that embodies her.

She:

I loved you the first time
My eyes saw yours
I felt in you a kindred spirit
A soul I could connect with
I thought you felt it too
Why is it then
That now as I show you our
First child
You do not seem to want him

She:

Effortlessly
I have fallen
I'm not stone
I am feeling
I am moving
Dancing
Drumbeats pulsating in me
Dressed in garments of red
Tell them I am happy
Tell them the omen has lifted
Tell them there is a man
A man with eyes that see me
Eyes that do not grope an stare
But see me
A man whose drumbeat moves me
Tell them there is a man
Who wants me
because the iroko bird has blessed me
I smile in times of sadness
and move to an invisible drum

She:

They used to whisper
That I was not born
They said my mother had
Gone to see a voodoo priestess
For a child
She was told to go to the
River that does not bend
She was told to
sing to the river spirit
She sung of the emptiness of the womb
The river spirit heard and had pity
And out of the water I came

They used to whisper
That I was cursed
That I would never find love
I emptied myself
And poured my essence at his feet
Still my love did not want me
I am she who will forever wait
wondering

She:

I have become the symphony that
Plays on the tips of your fingers
The chord that quivers
and vibrates
But does not last
I wanted to hear you say
You were with me
That we were together
I have grown used to lingering
Glances at watches
Grown used to
Meeting in cold places

Father:

I have grown used to
Ignoring the searching look
In your eyes
Telling myself you did not
Expect more than this
I do not belong to you
My eyes bleed under your pained gaze
Why can't you be happy with this?

She:

Is this what we are left with?
I just wanted a soothing voice
Beauty, intimacy
I have deceived myself
You taught me how to wait
For a man who was not mine
I could not tell what I desired more
The illusion or the intimacy
Will you leave me open like this?

Father:

Voices of affection whisper to me
In the night I hear them
Telling me to stay with you
But what do we have
What do we call this?

She:

You ask me what we call this

Has this not been love?
Stay with me
Do not go
We are the broken bits of glass
Hidden in the sand

Father:

A stillness has come upon us
We cannot go on like this

She:

Black, black skin
Pigment of dirt and clay
Molded in the light
In a kiln I burned
Experienced heat
And tasted ashes
At birth

Me:

And she wrote his name on water
Unperturbed by the hand that struck
Or the teeth that shook
She wrote his name on water
He like all the others would
Fade