

Letter to My Future Self

The Decision to See: Bearing Witness to the Pain of Community

Beloved Noelle,

Bitter isolation often drives the desire for community and connection. At six years old, the teachers taught us how to use our bodies to artfully bear witness to this truth transforming suffering as into a secular spiritual vision and practice. Six years old and we the descendants of pain and faith learned that we were the story keepers and artisans of our ancestors. We satisfied our charge by bearing witness to the confusion that bitter isolation and hurt begets - the pain of community, through song. We sang:

*God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,
Thou Who hast brought us thus far on the way;
Thou Who hast by Thy might, led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.(1)*

As a child I learned from television and books, that I was the descendant of a remarkable pain, a supreme fairy tale because it involved people who like me being tortured and encaged transformed into these crow and vulture status - niggers. I was a descendant, kin to the subjugated ones, the needy charitable ones, and the supervised burden of the American family.

Though the word was demeaning because it hinted to how my people in the truest sense of the words were simply parasites in the realm of human creativity and growth, we used the same word, not always, but some of the

time –differently. Instead of being defected we were on the “Right side of God” our use was familial, even comical but always spiritual. Other niggers though used the word Nigger with a capital, because we did nothing to be raped, massacred and tortured so we were similar to the persecuted saints of old: Our communal pain was holy, because it demonstrated the failure of human community when it is not familiar with the Truth of God. This was what made our suffering as niggers comical because the joke was on us, like the brer rabbit in the story – the narrative always depicted us being tricked but in the end we were victorious. God was always watching and was a friend of ours. We, the maimed, disenfranchised ones, the poor, the immigrants, the eye sore, deviants – were both the scorned and appointed ones in this reality that expected you to bear the failures and misunderstandings as apart of God’s master plan of spiritual growth of a global community. We, the Niggers bore the wrong of being human, the result of our actions and sins of community acting out, the shadow self (2) of our collective spirit.

My god, you could never take that feeling of disconnection from the full breath of life. You made the transition from being the six year old inherited story holder of a historical pain from television, movies and storybooks in a distant time to a current one when no longer did you have to imagine it, but could see it right in front of your face. When sweet times grew scarce all you could see around you was:

little girls limping, gap legged, opened up my neighbor beating her son with a chair watching on the street, girls fighting biting, ripping hair men drunk

crying on the street skinny dying kids whispering about me, laughing at me, yelling at me becoming a thing, amongst things, things, thing, getting a beating breath would shake fast, fast, fast..

I stopped bearing witness to what was around me once I became a watched one, I could not hide. Everyone watched, what is she midget woman, white girl, and nigger? I then began to bear witness for this person, this deviant who walked in step with me, a nigger, everyone else watched, remember, remember and remember:

There was once a girl who walked the streets alone, hugging the corners and spoke to her best friend that she knew from TV. She would look at the blank empty lots and imagine play areas where you could sit and talk besides your porch and the park you had to drive to, right here. She imagined a place where she could walk outside people would not stare and wonder: is that a midget woman?

Midget woman, midget woman, midget woman? Why you got a big head? Why you talk like a white girl? Why you never go outside?

She always needed to watch out. Watch out for the cracks in the street. Watch out for the people making fun. Watch out for the glass in the lots, dirty mattresses. Always watching out. The people staring, making fun, questioning, *who do you think you are? Why are you here? Why are you here? Why are you here?*

She started to question:

Why are you here?

Why am I here?

To bear witness; remember that you made the decision to see, even when it hurts, even when you are seeing the horror of other's faces in looking at yours for being different. As a girl I bore my "own" witness, this person that they said I was seeing myself walking down the street anticipating, how *she* the deviant would be received in community. Don't forget to always see, always feel. Always being told that I was different somehow made me feel like I had less stake in the reality of things. I was wrong, not natural to the environments so therefore unreal. How did we know what was real?

However the things connected to being a citizen were made not to see, to not know how things happen. Blocked out by bricks, large formidable government buildings guarded with multi-layered steps, set back from the street projects. The places where key decisions are made and blocked out; but I was expected to believe that these things were real. It seemed to be that the outsiders, the unreal, were most visible, the nodding off heroin addicts, we the cross dressers all were highlighted. I felt bad because I was apart of the ones who had no choice but to be watched and laughed at and hurt.

Why couldn't they see it hurt me? Why couldn't they see what I felt like deep inside? Perhaps those feelings I had were unreal.

When you are hurting and people still laugh are you real? When you have pain and people hurt you more, is it real.

Remember to truly see.

Remember when you realized that it was not just about the decisions in the unseen places either food, housing, legal rights but walking without fear tripping you up, licking without it hanging on your throat, understanding without it sitting on your ribs. The feeling that starts in the belly, scratching, multiple beasts racing to the top, filling out all sides, front paws tumbling up the intestines, leaping back and forth, bracing the sides of my throat with all four feet to get to the destination, the pool hell, inside my brain; my mind racing to recreate visions of previous fears and actions.

As an adult sought new songs, images and poems to sing about what I saw now. I rejected that suffering for the good of my community was the way of God. I learned seeing bearing witness to the truth, what was right in front of me was the Truth of God. June Jordan taught me to sing:

*Do You Follow Me: We are the wrong people of
the wrong skin on the wrong continent and what
in the hell is everybody being reasonable about...*

*I am the history of battery assault and limitless
armies against whatever I want to do with my mind
and my body and soul
and whether it's about walking out at night or whether...
I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name*

Bear witness always.

Noelle, remember what it took, you and all these years of meeting, marching, blocking, creating- the communicating, loving and hurting with the other surveyed watched - but not seen story holders. All together trying to change this community and this home where different people key populations are watched, seen as less real. Witness the hurt, torture and murder that comes along with being the watched ones, the prey.

Remembering the father chasing his son with an ax down a street saying "You will not live and be a fag." Remember hundreds of people watching, parting, and not helping as he ran down the middle of the street screaming for help, trying to either outrun his father, remember this, your worst nightmare to finally be perceived as so unreal you would need to be killed.

Remember that quote of a joke by Ronald Reagan that if ever caught in a forest with a friend and you are confronted by a bear that all you have to do is run faster than the bear?

Midget woman can you run faster than the other niggers?

Remember being all alone, again, people watching.

Remember pressing this pen against the paper to try to communicate the truth of your heart today. Remember sculpting joy and pain last night trying to communicate the Truth of what you see in that one moment

Be a story holder but remember to hold all of life.

Remember the vow to depict authentically the quietest and most painful fears and desires.

Even when it hurts, when it feels like bliss or you feel nothing at all. Bear witness always; remember that you made the decision to see.

Love is real,

Noelle Lorraine Williams

(1)

The "Negro National Anthem, " Lift Every Voice and Sing written by James Weldon Johnson 1899.

(2)

*Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is
embodied in the individual's conscious life,
the blacker and denser it is.*

*At all counts, it forms an unconscious snag,
thwarting our most well-meant intentions.*

— **Dr. Carl G. Jung**

June Jordan, Poem About My Rights, 1980