The Bears’ Tale
Pandemic 2020-2021

A Literary Arts Magazine
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- Karam Batra
Ten Alternate Names for Black Women

One: Beautiful brown queens of Zamunda
Two: Melanin daughters of the soil
Three: Flowers that bloom in the darkest of rooms
Four: Backbones that keep him standing up so strong
Five: Laid edges, greased scalps, natural and relaxed strands
Six: Not just your lips, thighs, and hips
Seven: Not just a neck roll and finger-snap away from the attitude they say you have
Eight: Not just an ignorant loudmouth
Nine: The most magnificent thing God created
Ten: Beautifully intelligent
Believe me when I say this, woman to woman
And when they try to tell you otherwise
THIS is what you say.

- Anna Kyles
Guns Kill

They say guns kill
I say they do not
But what does kill?
It’s the human staring you in the eye

They say guns kill
I said no they do not
It is that man who’s hungry for what you got
Do guns kill?

They say guns kill
But don’t you understand?
Guns cannot be used without a helping hand
I know that it is not guns that kill
It is the human hand of the man who kills.

- Tatyana Hawkins
Life

I am clothed by my troubles and my pain.
My eyes are like clouds full of rain.

Sometimes I question life because
some things just aren’t right with me
I often feel suicidal, killing my dreams and hopes.
I wish life would just let me be.

I once had this BIG heart
but life got to me and
showed me what heartbreak,
betrayal, and hatred are.
Now, there’s so much strife.

- Katheryne Perkins
Breaking Water

-1-

There is a slow mist coming off Niagara Falls today. Not like the caress of a soft rain. More like a deliberate slap in the face.

-2-

The tourists are here again. I watch them as they get off their buses with cameras and binoculars dangling from their necks. Some head straight for the souvenir stand, more interested in overpriced knick-knacks than bearing witness to HIS works. They don’t see what I see.

-3-

I turn and watch as the man who sells t-shirts with out-of-date sayings like “Niagara Falls or Bust” beckons to me. He motions with his arms but I cannot bring myself to move in his direction. I do not want his sympathy. I do not want his face to say, “I’m sorry. Surely you can have another.”

-4-

No one understands. They all wanted to know what I was thinking. Me, a middle-aged woman with a nowhere job, and a deadbeat ex. Getting pregnant at my age and in my circumstance. Didn’t I know better?

But I wanted him. And they will never know how much. He was my angel baby.
So, I didn’t really mind that I was sick all the time.

And I didn’t mind that I had to spend three long months in bed.

And I didn’t mind that my whole body itched so badly in labor I would have just as soon torn my skin to pieces to make it stop. I knew that He was testing me. I knew I had to be strong.

When God finally relinquished him to me it was all I could do to praise HIS name. And so I mouthed a prayer: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven...

But I don’t remember doing what they say I did. I only washed him as I washed myself, baptized him into a communion of everlasting salvation. Those were not my baby’s fingers reaching up out of the water and toward HIM, they were mine.

Then the visions started and of a sudden my body would give way to the voices rising and surrounding me, pressing in on me until I couldn’t breathe, growing louder and more horrible with accusation until they weren’t voices anymore but a caterwauling in my head and me falling into darkness and tongues of fire lashing out at me, threat-
ening to eat me alive and I struggling to gain my footing and catch my breath – to reach safe ground – but there is no safe ground because now the fire is inside of me, eating at me from the inside out, and all I can hear are my own cries, terrible cries of sorrow and torment, until the only thing left of me is mangled skull and bone which the earth cannot contain.

-11-

The visions are the real reason I came here today. These Falls are a consolation to me now, their vast depths a mirror of the everlasting, their mighty roar a thunder in my blood.

-12-

I am aware of a delicious ache as I step to the precipice and leap; my body twists and tumbles in the air and the world recedes and before me rise great peaks of foam and around me water mists like ancient baptismal sprays.

-13-

I whirl between time and no time, between place and no place, and the sound of the water is a trumpet in my ears.

-14-

My angel baby has made a path for me, and I rise and I rise and I rise on HIS impetus until the water parts, as they surely did for Moses, and my body collapses onto the cradle of the sea.

- Eleanor Branch
Expectations

My wants and fears guide me
I have my dreams in a death grip
In case reality attempts to deprive me
I have to produce more effort to provide for me
I’m weary
Weighed down by guilt, shame, and my propriety
Responsibilities help me keep pace
Treading lightly
Don’t want my demons to awake
But I’m down now, only for a time
Lying down, Plans decorate the walls of my mind
Rest should be the only moment for laziness
Crazy thing is…
I’m up in so many other ways
I accept that obstacles are the spirit’s jungle gym
Although I put away childish things
I can be raised up in the knowledge that there is beauty in suffering
Nothing is gained without alteration
Therefore, the beauty of my suffering is displayed in the raiment of my joy
The expectations I have make me eager for the future
With fervor, I walk into the effort I have to produce
May opportunity be my strength
Assurance my faith
Intention my peace

- Adina Denton
Truth

What is my Truth?
How do I prove myself to my reflection of reproof?
Internal battles fought on the fields of indignation
No blood spilled, but a wounded spirit
The clamor of my pain ascends the sky frequently
That the heavens reply in kind with thunder vehemently
Even nature shudders at my sorrow

What is my truth?
Am I simply reaching?
I clasp my hands
My fingers intertwined, intending to pray up
To whatever benevolence scratches the surface of a world darkened by malevolence

Pieces should fall into place
Instead I face reality with an uncertainty that burdens me
How do I know when I have found myself?
When losses brush up against me with the familiarity of a lover’s touch
When hesitance is receptive to doubts, birthing risks
Risks can sometimes lack heart
So, confidence has given up

What is my truth?
Am I living for the not or simply entertaining my youth?
After all, time Is frivolous to adolescence
Maybe I’m trying to sustain what I lost growing up too soon

What is my truth?
Do you know yours?
Will you leave this earth content?
Can your accomplishments spin a tale that marks history?
Or make your ancestors proud?
Learn your truth
Be warned!
Sometimes the truth hurts
- Adina Denton

LOVE

What do I think of love?
It is a waste of time.
Nothing but heartache and sorrow.
You might be in love today.
But you will regret it tomorrow.
- Amber Purdie
NOT GOOD ENOUGH

Why would you take over?
Why would you make it hard for me to get it over with?
Why are you so controlling?
You control my mind, body, and soul
And yet I am still here fighting these demons?
Do you even love me, or is this just temporary?
Why can’t I function when you are around?
Do you hear the sounds around you?
Do you hear my cries?
I barely cry, but when I do all my hurt, pain,
and anger
Come out and here I am
Crying!

Am I not good enough?
All of these people depending on me
And yet I am asking myself: am I good enough?
You are the reason I have these uncontrollable thoughts
You are the reason I question. Am I good enough?
When will you take the responsibility that you are the one
Who has me questioning Girl, are you okay?
Are you worth it?
Is it worth it?
You good enough, sis?
What did I ever do to deserve this?
All these people believe in me
But you are the one standing in front of me
   Do you believe in me?
Why can’t I be happy for me?
Can’t you see that I love me
   I love you
But I’m not good for you
   I am better than you
   I am stronger than you
I can be myself without you
I am good enough without you
   You do know that, right?!

You take over my mind, body, soul
   Like for what? Why my soul?
      Why my thoughts?
Who are you to tell me that I am not enough
   That I am not good enough.

I HAVE HAD ENOUGH WITH YOU
YOU CANNOT CONTROL ME
YOU CANNOT OVERTAKE ME!
I WILL NO LONGER LET YOU
WHO ARE YOU?!
I’LL TELL YOU WHO I AM:
I AM THE ONE
WHO FIGHTS BACK AND
WON’T GIVE UP!
I AM INTELLIGENT, STRONG, COURAGEOUS
AND BEAUTIFUL!
I AM A WARRIOR WHO CONQUERS ALL
EVEN CONQUERS LOVE

Because I am good enough!
I will not let my thoughts take over!
I will control my thoughts
And I will believe in myself!
I will not let my family down!!!
I damn sure won’t let my believers down!
I will make it in this world and
Not look down upon myself
Because I am good enough and
I am taking control of my self-doubt
And these negative thoughts in my head
Because I am a believer
And now my own number one fan!

- NaTashia Thurman
Watching You Watch Me

Love is blind but I am not...
Because I see you every time you look at me
out of the corner of your eye
and I notice
the way you trip over your words
in my presence
I think it's beautiful
I fall deeper in love
with the way you try and hide

because it makes it so much easier to see you
I love the way you hold me
I love how you manage to put your pride aside
long enough to make me smile
When I look at you with interest, it's not fake
I would have you if you would let me

- Sierra Boyd
Remembering Literary Giant Ernest J. Gaines

The year 2019 was a memorable one for the international literary community. More notably, the black community has taken a hit. Writers whose pens eloquently sketch *living black*, at the crown of America’s self-examination and transition into a modern world have been punctuated with a period. Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and now, Ernest Gaines, have left this earth; however, their literary thumbprints will live, inspire, and teach generations to come.

As a 2016 National Endowment for the Humanities: Ernest Gaines Institute Fellow, the passing of Dr. Gaines, has caused my heart to skip a beat. Ernest James Gaines, born in Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana was more than a great American Southern novelist; he was a literary master who painted portraits of Louisiana scenery and Louisiana souls. His humility in depicting painful and controversial realities in American society has positioned him as one of the greatest literary minds from America. In addition to being the recipient of numerous awards and honors, his work, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* is a required read for middle school aged children in public schools in France, and my favorite, *A Lesson Before Dying*, won the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction and is a listed read of the National Endowment for the Arts, The Big Read.

As a participant in the NEH Gaines Institute hosted at The Gaines Center on the campus of University of Louisiana at Lafayette, I read and own personally autographed copies of all of Gaines’s texts except *The Tragedy of Brady Sims* (2017), released after the 2016 Institute. I promised myself I would have *Tragedy* autographed by Dr. Gaines in an effort to take advantage of an invitation he extended to the NEH Fellows – to visit his home and the cemetery on November 1, All Saints’ Day for ceremonial upkeep. Time wasn’t kind to me.
As an educator, I am motivated by Ernest Gaines’s works, and, as a humanitarian, I am moved by his life story. Incidentally, I am writing about *A Lesson Before Dying*. The text is a struggle for inner strength and dignity as the main character Grant Wiggins, is an educator in an underfunded school who is undergoing teacher burnout. This work serves as encouragement to educators as Professor Wiggins reaches his most challenging student, a death row inmate named Jefferson, through the Humanities – and achieves the ultimate student learning outcome: self-worth. Furthermore, Gaines not only wrote about his Louisiana experience; he honored it. After years of living in California, Gaines moved back home to the plantation where he once worked as a child and that served his family for five generations. He and his wife, Dianne, purchased this land, built their home on this land, and moved the 100 year old church from the plantation to their backyard. Likewise, the land includes a cemetery where generations of blacks on the plantation were buried. As a fellow, I was welcomed in their home, sat and sang in the church, and was awed by the history and imaginings of the untold stories in the graveyard. I recall Dr. Gaines stating how he, too, wanted to be buried in the cemetery “to lie with those who have no mark.”

- Da’Tarvia Parrish

Photo courtesy of
Jason Miccolo-Johnson
- Akeem Crittington
I Wouldn’t Call It Arrogance

Smiling cheek to cheek
Parading down the hill
Feeling transcendent
Outrageously flamboyant

Who’s taking a gander
Not I
Defying the odds
Feeling everyone being a critic
With all eyes on me

Stay focused Keep strutting
Pay him and his friends no mind
She’s supportive and encouraging
Yet the one she’s with is narrow-minded
Inconsistent and cheating
That’s not my tea to spill

I hear the slick comments
The name calling
And misjudgment
You definitely got me 3 things
Me! Messed! Up!

My display is not offensive
Not feeling any superiority
Self-importance? Damn right!
Who’s going to love me more than me
They’re limits I could push, but do I? No
I look weird?
I’m over confident?
I don’t look approachable?

You blame it on my zodiac sign
Because the stars say Virgos are this and that

Having high standards -
Is that really a bad thing?
Being involved
Being in charge
Being reliable
Being the adult
Helping all
But not a hand to help me

Strive to be great
Turn negatives into positives
Conceited? Maybe
Arrogant? I wouldn’t call it that
It starts with an opinion
But the only one that matters
Is yours
Continue to push through

- Akeem Crittington

The thought of you
Candles burning, dancing in the shadow of night.
Flowers growing beside the shed where you planted them.
Loud, loud laughs; good times; barbeques; cooking lessons; honeydews are what I remember about you.

- Cyena Shavers
Letter to My Younger Self

I wish I had met you
In a world before you got hurt
Sometimes I feel like we would have been better intact
   Than separated.
   Trying to escape the system
   Buckled down
   Trying to run the race
   The train is coming - I can’t lose my grace
I wish I had been there to tell you to hold your head up
To fear nothing that was created by the same man above as you were
   I should have told you that
   Everyone out here doesn't have a heart
   Like you.
   Everything you have you to have to protect
   Don’t become bitter like these other girls
   Smile and continue to Love
   Let nothing break your spirit
   Even when there are days
   You feel like you are about to break
   Stay Put!

- Imeralde Gardner
A Lover’s Remorse

Why must I beat myself up?
Because I had the courage to love?
Gave you all my hopes, my dreams, my desires?

Why do I beat myself up?
It was his choice to be unfaithful
His choice to hurt me

Why must I beat myself up?
Knowing that I did everything I could
Supported him, comforted him, loved him more than I loved myself

Why? After his lies and deceit
Do I still love him?
Why? After the repeat of hurt and trust being neglected
Do I think he deserves a love as pure as mine?

Why do I beat myself up?
Over what I could’ve done
When I know deep down there was nothing
What makes me search for answers
As to why when they wouldn’t change the past?

Why when a man decides to cheat
Do we long for him to change his ways
Realizing how wrong he was
Yet we fall in love with him again

Why when a man decides to cheat
Do we blame ourselves
It makes us question every detail about ourselves
Makes us think we aren’t worthy of love
Why must I beat myself up?
When I deserve more
When all that I have done was love him completely

Give myself time
The pain will subside
The mourning will cease
I will see that I am still true

Wonderful, Beautiful
Nothing has changed other than my view of love
My determination to share my love with another

I can never truly love someone
Till I learn to love myself

- Kaliyah Lowery

Sin

my lover sleeps with one eye open.
staring and fixed on the rising sun.
daring to question the light that it brings forth, and
faulting dim stars for their pitiful shine.
raging at God for our prayers unanswered,
cursing the fruit that our labors-undone have not brought.
arms wrapped around me to shield me from rapture,
fearing the ordinance of the great divine.

- D’Yahnah Goodwin
The Little Girl in Me

I don’t recall a moment when my great grandmother was ever warm and kind to me. She was the meanest woman I knew while growing up. My brother and I spent a lot of our childhood with her until she became ill and moved into a nursing home. We girls were always treated worse than the boys. I don’t remember what would set her off, but I knew the way she spoke to me was meant to be malicious and the way she chose to “discipline” me more than anybody else wasn’t by accident. There were even times I would hear her speaking to my older sister and mom the same way she spoke to me. We were all “heifers,” “tramps,” “liars,” and “stealers” and her voice was shaping the way I felt about myself and how I believed other people saw me too.

There was an order to the way grandma treated us that I didn’t learn until I got older. The boys were treated the best, then the dark-skinned girls, followed by the light skinned girls at the bottom of the food chain. Because my brother and I both had fair skin growing up, there was a drastic difference in the way she treated us from the others. This is not to say she was ever nice to my brother, but that she just wasn’t as mean to him as she was to me. We were all called names, but hearing them come from a woman just had a different effect on my experience as a little girl. It felt like this woman hated my every breath some days and that I could do nothing right in her house. She would put on a front in public, but behind closed doors it wasn’t so pretty.

My grandmother had a special belt she would use to hit me with depending on how terrible she thought my actions were. It had metal holes in it that would catch the wind so the blow would sting a bit more. The leather one was her favorite to use though. She would say “go into the other room and bend over on the chair.” There was a moment of anticipation as felt the swing coming my way. Hearing the leather crack on my skin was like hearing my own heart break. I joke about it now, but having light skin means you bruise way quicker and easier than anybody else. As she got older and sicker, her words would cut just as deeply as the belt. I was worthless,
untrustworthy, and a sexual deviant in her eyes. I was a “lying tramp” at the age of nine and didn’t even know what that term meant. I just knew it wasn’t good by the way she said it. With every strike of the belt and every “heifer,” I could feel any shred of self-esteem being taken away from me.

Last Thanksgiving, I sat and listened to a conversation my mom and aunt were having about the women in our family. Apparently, their mother (my grandmother) had a terrible childhood growing up. She was sexually abused by her father and physically abused by her mother. My great grandmother suffered from similar treatment by her husband. It’s safe to say there is a lot of residual pain trickling down the generations of women on my mother’s side of the family, generations of women who suffered from depression, wanted to kill themselves, were victims of abusive relationships, and lacked self-esteem growing up. When the people who are supposed to care for and love you treat you badly and tell you that you are worthless, it hurts. It’s hard to move past that kind of hurt inflicted by your mother and grandmother.

Learning all this new information made me rethink my experience growing up and my interactions with these women. It made me consider the kind of woman I am today. Was I still holding on to all of their pain as well as my own? Is this why, deep down, I’m scared to have a daughter of my own? So many questions began to spin in my head as I thought about the little girl in me. She felt abandoned, unwanted, and confused. It wasn’t too long ago that I was still feeling those same feelings as a grown woman. I wondered: Who would I be without all the pain? Who could I have become if the women in my life had been warmer and more nurturing?

My grandmother singlehandedly destroyed yet also created the woman I am today.

- Anna Kyles
More Than a Game

On that very day
The team comes together to prepare.
After a very tough loss
They need to make up and repair.

The hotel was a place of peace,
The soft beds, the pool, the spa.
Not to mention all the stretching,
It just all seems like a lot.

The manager loads up the bus
They make their way towards the away team’s gym.
Before they go, they get some grub,
It’s 3 hours before the trip.

The arrive to a crowd of boos,
But the star players got more fame.
The team came together for the road win,
They know it’s more than a game.

- Jovan Embry
Why?

Pop, pop, pop!
Darkness gives way to the light, but it is just a facade.
The light soon fades and darkness reclaims its domain and
a body lies slain.
With the morning brightness, you can clearly see t
he remains of blood stains: why?

Yes, why do they line up at the altar like lambs for the slaughter?
Because they all have heard of somebody,
known of somebody, or
seen somebody that made the sacrifice.

Why do they think it's worth the price
to have their image on a tee with the letters R.I.P.?
Was it because they considered him a lamb and
he couldn't get brains from no dame because
his shoes didn't have the Jordan name, or
because he was tired of living off his mom's government check and
he couldn't get no Gucci belt at Christmas with that, or
that he knew winter was coming and
he didn't want to repeat shivering between the sheets because
they had no heat?

Regardless of the reasons and unfortunately there are many,
the question is who's up next - is it you?
Why?

- Christiana Bockarie
My Thoughts on the Pandemic

As the world experiences a global pandemic that continues to take thousands of lives and instill fear and doubt within the minds and heart of God's people, this is the opportune time for the church to be the voice, or beacon of light that it should be.

The problem here is, instead of Christian involvement being paramount and a necessity, Christianity and the church have decided to take a step back to the evil forces of the land and allow Satan's kingdom to divide, conquer, and rule, for far too long.

Ephesians 6:12 states: "For we are not fighting against human beings but against the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age."

Our ancestors fought long and hard for us to be where we are today; however, Christianity and the church have also allowed fear of earthly man to take over and are tight lipped. Therefore, we must awaken the spirit of the all-powerful Man, also referred to as Jehovah/God/Yahweh, and allow his light to shine. Forever.

As Yahweh has allowed COVID-19 to take its course, He is also allowing the Church of God and Christians to show the world what they are made of. This is the time when Christians must display love, peace, and unity, now more than ever. It's imperative that Christians understand that We are the church and not the building, and, in everything that we do, our light should be exemplified.

Christian involvement is more than necessary not only to promote peace and love and upliftment but also to obey the word of God and prove God’s power to the World, as we are on a standstill.

As we are and have been living the revelations of the All Mighty, we have taken for granted the grace and mercies of our Lord and Saviour. Now we must take time to reflect and ask forgiveness and guidance for our future.

Christian involvement is necessary, as the Good News Translation (Gospel) 2chronicles 7:14 states, "If they pray to me and repent and turn away from the evil they have been doing, then I will hear them in heaven, forgive their sins, and make their land prosperous again."

We all have sinned and fallen short of the grace and mercies of God, and now is the perfect time to prove our worth not only to man, but Man, our father who art in Heaven, and plead to Him for the healing of our land.

**Heaven on Earth**

Matthew 6: 9-15 states, "This, then, is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven: May your holy name be honored; may your Kingdom come; may your will be
done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today the food we need. Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us. Do not bring us to hard testing but keep us safe from the Evil One. If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done.”

**Unity is Strength**

Psalms 46:10-11 states, "’Stop fighting,’ he says, ‘and know that I am God, supreme among the nations, supreme over the world. The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.’"

Western Christians find themselves increasingly out of step with a post Christian society. So how can we hope to influence our country into a return to Christian values, in its laws, its institutions and its culture? Should Christians attempt to impose their views on a nation that has turned its back on God?

My answer is simple: in order for us to influence our country we must first lead by example. An old adage says "experience is the best teacher," and experience has taught us that, as long as we are divided, we will always be conquered. However, experience has also taught us, that when we, as a people, are united, we can accomplish all things through Christ who strengthens us.

Therefore, in order to ignite a return of Christian values, we must be able to unite as Christians first. We must put away petty differences and denominational separation and realize that we are all one family, serving one people and worshiping the one true and living God. Before we can be of influence to the nation, we must first be on one accord within our belief of the omnipotent God. For it is impossible to achieve a return to Christian values in our nation if we, ourselves, are separated.

Every day a Christian lives, he should in some way be a light to the world. To believers, and non-believers alike, they should never stop speaking truth, or standing firmly in their beliefs.

Matthew 4:19 states:"’Jesus said to them, ‘Come with me, and I will teach you to catch people.’” Therefore, whether a nation has turned its back on God or not, once we are disciples of Christ, we Christians should always go out and be fishers of men and speak truth, and when the Lord - our God, our refuge - is ready, He will force the nation to praise Him.

Shalom.

- Percival Simms
The Fence and the Tattoo

- Akeem Crittington
Hello
My name is COVID-19
I have come to you from China
(or maybe Thailand)
I come in many forms and
If I find you, I can change your life
Forever
I will keep people from their families
And their friends
From their churches
And their schools
As my numbers rise
More people die
Why?
Because I am COVID-19
- Briana Mickens (Essential Worker)