Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Forever Flint

Sharanna Brown · Wednesday, May 25th, 2016

PMS poemmemoirstory is an all-women's literary journal published annually by the University of Alabama Birmingham. It proudly features the best literary writing by emerging and established women writers. The following story recently appeared in PMS. To order: Print Edition Kindle Edition

Forever Flint

People ask me about the boys in Flint. They wonder if they're malicious, ruthless and vengeful. It is hard to explain that these boys are charismatic, easy going and approachable.

It is difficult to explain that for a black girl, these are the kind of boys you fall in love with, because they're in your proximity. You grew up with them, you know them and they have never been cruel to you. When stranded, it has been these boys who've provided transportation, and when threatened, it is their phones you've called. Their faces have been the equivalent of home and familiarity, comfort and security.

You don't say cliché things like, "They've just been dropped into the wrong spaces," and you don't dare mention that the skin they're in just isn't the right color for America sometimes. It's hard to summarize hopelessness and joblessness, paired with poverty. You don't explain these kinds of things, because you don't know how, so instead you reply, "No, they're regular."

Death

"Quan died."

Tangy's voice on the phone is girly: Light, contemplative, soft.

Hours before, a different voice on the telephone had told me that somebody had been shot at the Body Shop, the city's most popular strip club at the time. They think it may have been Quan. Then Bararkas called back saying that it was Quan, but he was at the hospital on life support and he might make it.

"That's fucked up," Tangy said. "If I had been in that club, I would have been shot too." I can visualize her arm wrapped around Quan's neck, mimicking lyrics to rap songs, smiling, jumping up and down. She and I are one in the same and so beside she and Quan, I also see myself with my neck buried in his huge arm.

This isn't the first boy she's loved and lost.

When Marquan called in 2007, asking her to come out with him, she couldn't come up with a lie to tell her mother, and so she cut her phone off. The next morning his body was found on a street corner.

"I'll call you back." I hang up and call Emery.

"Hello?" His voice is upbeat, cheery, and expectant.

"Quan gone."

"Gone where?"

“Like, gone.” I feel my throat clogging. I feel like he’s going to force me to say it.
“But gone where?”
Silence.
“Sharanna!” It comes out high pitched. “Where he gone to?” Then his voice breaks and he begins crying, “Where Quan gone to?”
I hang up.
2010 was full of death.
I didn’t want to talk about it, because I didn’t know what to say, and moreover I didn’t know what to feel. I knew that there was something terribly wrong, but at 19, I was incapable of articulating it.
When my brother called two days before Bararkas did, to tell me that they finally found Dominique in Forest Park, under melted snow and tires, I sat in the study room at Wayne State University and stared blankly at the walls.
It won’t be until four years later that I find myself on the bathroom floor crying hysterically, because it is 3 a.m. and the image of Dominique leaning into Tangy’s car window, smiling at me, won’t go away. That’s the last time I saw him. It was December, a month after Jamica and Rashawn were found murdered in their home.
And so going into 2010 was already weighted, and confusing, feeling somehow stuffed.
May would claim M.B., and in August, Eric would be shot on his birthday.
Two years later, Mauricia will be found in the passenger seat of her car, parked outside of Hurley Medical Center’s Emergency entrance. It’ll only take two days for Kenyatta—last seen the day of Mauricia’s murder– to be found in a vacant lot.
In November of 2012, Matt Wayne’s death would break the city’s record, set by the year which claimed Quan, Dominique, M.B. and Eric.
Tangy would tell me years later, “Sometimes I wanna call Quan and tell him to come get me. Then I remember.”
I know that feeling. I know the heaviness of that remembering. And I know how crushing it can be; how you slowly suffocate, even if a moment earlier, you were breathing just fine.

Inner-City Woes

Home Security Shield gave the title of Michigan’s worst city to Flint, and FBI statistics revealed the city to be 2012’s most dangerous in America—the same year that the city only employed 122 police officers.
Business Insider’s How Flint, Michigan Became the Most Dangerous City in America, attributes the violence to poverty, unemployment, and drugs.
Ironically, photojournalist Brett Carlsen described the city as “caring,” saying that “the people of Flint actually give a shit about the people around them, which is refreshing.”
Across the country, I found my city on top lists for the worst place to live; it was startling. In Alabama State University’s student media room, I glanced around to make sure nobody saw what I saw and for some reason, my heart was beating uncontrollably. I read what the articles said, and I didn’t believe them, for if the things they said were true, and I had really come from one of America’s worst cities, what else was out there? I had been happy, but now I felt fooled; I didn’t know if I could rely on these facts or my own memories.
Although it seemed as if the violence was senseless, in my house, my father had said, “People ain’t just killin’ people for no reason. They killing the people they wanna kill.”
Contrary to popular belief, you weren’t just getting shot for walking down the street; you were getting shot for walking down the street alone, after you’d shot at the shooter a week, even a month ago. You were getting murdered for partaking in a robbery with murderers who feared that you–after taking a victim to the hospital— would feel any droplet of remorse and go to the authorities.

There was a girl at Alabama State from Flint, and she had turned up her nose at my friends and I. She had told a girl that she didn't want people knowing she was from Flint, because she hated how people from Flint acted: Loud, bold and ignorant. I was confused; I had been raised to love my hometown and was even proud.

But now, the computer screen becoming blurry, I understood her shame, even if I could not partake in it.

That city had birthed me. Its streets and I had had plenty of love affairs and it had even gone as far as to lick my wounds, and stand me up straight when I felt my back bending.

Of all the factors listed as contributing to the city's violence, education was not one of them, despite the fact that schools are closing one after another–mostly in predominately black neighborhoods—leaving kids idle, stranded and confused.

In a city were turfs are determined by zoning laws of school districts, switching schools could be the equivalent of dropping out, since you'll find yourself outside of the walls for fighting.

When the city's oldest high school—Central–closed, my brother was mandated to attend Northwestern, but he was from the wrong side of town. Eventually, he stopped going, unable to sit in a classroom and learn, while watching the hallways at the same time.

Central students, known for their stubbornness, were also overly proud and resistant to claiming any building but their own, and so when they entered the halls of rivals, they were met with snickers and side jabs, jokes and a sense homelessness. Still, after being scattered throughout the city away from friends, they would not conform to another school's pride. So, as fights between Central and Northwestern students broke out on one side of town, on another side the displaced kids were being targeted by Flint Northern students.

The only other option would have been Southwestern, but my brother told me, "They only let the smart kids go to Southwestern."

"They didn't want us in their schools. They was mad when the Central kids came," he explained that Central's closing hurt him. "It's the only school I actually ever wanted to be at."

The only school to rival Central's prideful stubbornness was Northern—my alma mater.

In 2008, the city stopped sending school buses to my neighborhood, because I did not live within my high school's zone restrictions; I lived in Central's zone. Because I was a gifted student, I was allowed to attend the school of my choice, but by my senior year, the Magnet program was cut because of a deficiency in funds—the exact reason they gave for closing a troubling number of schools.

Superintendent Linda Thompson, who has said "no one is beating down the doors to buy or occupy" these schools failed to mention that there are no schools to occupy, with over 20 educational institutions closing.

The city houses only two high schools, and after eight elementary school closings, only 10 remain in a city, that housed a population of over 100,000 in 2012. Although in 2014, the population fell below 100,000—for the first time since the 1920's—it is safe to say that the decrease in residents was a result of the school closings and not only the cause.

Residents told MLive reporters that "closing buildings in neighborhoods already plagued by crime and foreclosures" would only add to their worries.

Thompson explained that the buildings would eventually be demolished, "but there just isn't any money for it in the current budget," adding that, "For now, the district will secure the sites, maintain them and check on them regularly."

That was May 2013, and in December 2014, all of the schools were still standing: boarded up at first, then left wide open. I walked into the demolition of my own elementary school easily, and roamed the ruined hallways.

I saw the Humpty Dumpty drawing on the old classroom wall, the office I'd been sent to for

carrying a butter knife, the hallway I'd been forced to walk in a straight line. I walked into Ms. Jackson's old English classroom, peered into Mrs. Rinoldo-Hopkin's Social Studies class and I felt my heart break.

31-year-old Roy Fields told MLive that the city has "left kids out here astray. They neglected our school system. Neglected our children. Neglected our people."

The Facts

She called my brother a nigger. She spit it at him. None of us—the children– knew how to take it, since both of her grandchildren were fathered by a black man, but even in elementary school, we knew it wasn't a term of endearment.

My daddy had not looked at us when he said, "Don't go over there anymore," and my mama had called her an "old white bitch."

She was Tre's grandmother: aged, thin, and severely wrinkled with blotched skin. She had the nicest house on the block, with an above ground swimming pool in the backyard. She was stubborn and nosey with cameras plastered around her house. She called the police a lot, once because I was breaking bricks in the street. I think the only reason she stayed in the neighborhood was because her house was paid off; she seemed to hate the neighborhood—she seemed to hate us.

Homes in majority black neighborhoods do not appreciate as much as homes in overwhelmingly white neighborhoods. This appreciation gap begins whenever a neighborhood is more than 10% black, and it increases right along with the percentage of black homeowners.

A 2001 Brookings Institution study, showed that "wealthy minority neighborhoods had less home value per dollar of income than wealthy white neighborhoods." The same study concluded that "poor white neighborhoods had more home value per income than poor minority neighborhoods."

Even if my neighborhood wasn't in rapid decline, it is possible my baby brother would have still had "Nigger" spit at him and it's possible that the individual doing the spitting would have been younger and less reluctant to leave their home. It is also possible that we would have been left in a majority black neighborhood, resulting in a decline of property value, leading to the neighborhood's zoned schools receiving insufficient funding.

When we moved to Hillcroft Drive, the streets were full and littered with people. The lawns had grass and the houses were well-built. That was in the 90's. Now, the empty spaces where houses used to be are overwhelming. Some homes stand, burnt, lopsided and vandalized. Others just look sad, lonely and defeated, but I remember when they were alive and I was running in and out of their backdoors.

I remember loitering on the corner with drug dealers, waiting for them to say they were hungry, because not only would they give gas money, they'd supply McDonalds. And if it was going to be a long night, they'd lend out their fancy cars with the loud music. I remember not having to call anybody to see where they were, because I already knew, and it was just a matter of waking up, getting dressed and going outside.

In 2009, the police security camera was set up outside of Tangy's house, flashing its blue light on her bedroom window. It was intended to monitor crime, in what officials and residents called "one of the city's worst neighborhoods"—my neighborhood.

The camera was shot down twice, until finally, the city gave up restoring it.

I remember encouraging the shooting down of the light, especially after it failed to see my best friend being stabbed in the middle of the street. I remember the skin of Tangy's arm hanging, ripped apart by a blade in the hands of a girl whose name and description had been given, yet who had remained on the street, taunting us.

Heather Ann Thompson writes that "de-industrialization and suburbanization surely did their part to erode our nation's black and brown neighborhoods, but staggering rates of incarceration is what literally emptied them out," going on to assert that "such concentrated levels of imprisonment have

torn at the social fabric of inner city neighborhoods in ways that even people who live there find hard to comprehend, let alone outsiders."

Thompson sums up her argument by stating that "America's poorest people of color had no seat at the policy table where mass incarceration was made."

Jason Riley wrote in Washington Times that "the political left wanted to have a discussion about everything except the black crime rates that lead people to view young black males with suspicion," but failed to mention that young black males are viewed with suspicion even before they contributed to high crime rates.

My oldest brother—brown, braided hair, grey shirt, blue jeans– hemmed up on a police car for "walking in the streets when a sidewalk was provided."

His eyes staring into mines, saying, "Go get daddy!"

I run home, yelling through the armor guarded door, "The police got C.P!"

Daddy jumps up, slips his feet into house shoes and we walk the two blocks.

"What y'all arresting him for?"

"We got a call about somebody shooting out here, sir," the si stung in my ears as the police told my daddy that my brother fit the description, although they'd given us a different reason.

"What's the description?"

"He was wearing a grey shirt and he had braids, sir."

"Every damn body out here fit the fuckin' description!"

I don't want my brother to fit a description. I don't want to run home to seek protection from the police, yet I stand there, dumbfounded but proud. I have armor, even if it is only in the form of Daddy.

Forever

There are women whose children will not be coming home. There are friends that I will never ride in the car with again. There are boys I have loved, who became my brothers, who I will never again meet in the street for a fist fight nor call on the phone. They will never see me smack my grown-up lips or roll my wiser eyes. And all the while, life will keep moving and people will keep believing that things aren't so bad. And in the midst of this pretend okay-ness, there is a city, longing for life support, losing its children in daylight, fearing that it may not make it through the night.