

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

January Gill O'Neil: Three Poems

January Gill O'Neil · Sunday, August 17th, 2025

Muscadine

All my life I have avoided what I don't understand—
what buzzes by and spirals in the air, what lands on
me and drinks my blood—and here I am in early autumn
learning how to spot king snakes and coachwhips,
listening to the soft music of flying grasshoppers,
watching for twine-like spiderwebs that block our path.
And here you are shaking the snaking vines down
from sweetgum trees for muscadine, that wild grape,
letting them fall into the leaf clumps. A few roll onto
the path. How you used to covet them in autumn months.
You bite into the dark oval, give me the other half—
sweet and seedful, tough skin surrounding the soft flesh
inside: this is where the world rewilds, swallows the sun,
the wild soil, what is buried here, what remains hidden.

*

Miseducation

I love the needle drop, that slow gravel walk
into Lauryn Hill's *Miseducation* of herself,
my daughter's turntable album
we bought for her 18th birthday.
If I did one thing right, I introduced
her to this neo-soul queen and her one
and only studio album, which tonight
plays in the background while she cooks
for me—some vegetarian dish with chick
peas and cilantro. The brown album cover:
a desk from Hill's high school with her face
carved into an old-school wooden desk
with a pencil well, one I recognize from

my Catholic School days. I know this girl,
 waiting for her turn to shine, eyes black
 as marbles. That one spring when I taught
 creative writing in a room where someone
 penciled “FUCK THIS” on a desk like a low
 graphite hiss in an unremarkable semester.
 Lauryn’s voice unfurls, her locks waving,
 calling us in like a school bell ringing
 class into session. Like Whitney, like Aretha,
 Lauryn knows love in all its colors.
 “You might win some, but you just lost one,”
 she belts over a hip-hop reggae beat.
 I think of her now—gloriously older, wiser,
 troubled—delivering a flawless set on SNL50.
 I hope it’s all sweeter the second time around.
 I hope my daughter finds her own groove:
 that girl on the cover singing every shade
 of light and dark, how she made it through
 when there was no way out.

*

The Prayer Doesn’t Change the Song

Another shooting. A community
 bank on a busy Monday morning. Not a
 church or a grocery store this time.
 Downtown kicks into high alert as
 emergency vehicles block crowded streets.
 Five killed, eight injured. Another town
 gripped by guns, another day feeling
 helpless. Through all the breaking news,
 I wonder about my friend who teaches
 just a few blocks away as the city pulses.
 (Kathleen, I owe you a call.)
 Louisville, land of bourbon and horses,
 Muhammad Ali and Colonel Sanders,
 not too far from the Ohio River—Ohi:yo,
 once called “Good River” by the Seneca.
 Prayer is a river run dry, yet I’m
 questioning everything, thinking of Adrienne
 Rich’s poem “What Kind of Times Are These,”—
 “sometimes it’s necessary to talk about trees.”
 The Redbuds bloom like small, bright wounds
 urging action, each day singed by
 violence. Another shooting. No
 warning. Who’s next? We wear
 X’s on our backs, cross lines marked by

yellow police tape. Sam Cooke on Spotify sings:
(Zero chance) *a change is gonna come*.

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