

# 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.

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### 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.

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## 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

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

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