

The Idea of Ancestry

1

Taped to the wall of my cell are 47 pictures: 47 black faces: my father, mother, grandmothers (1 dead), grand fathers (both dead), brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins (1st & 2nd), nieces, and nephews. They stare across the space at me sprawling on my bunk. I know their dark eyes, the know mine. I know their style, they know mine. I am all of them, they are all of me; they are farmers, I am a thief, I am me, they are thee.

I have at tone time or another been in love with my mother, 1 grandmother, 2 sisters, 2 aunts (1 went to the asylum), and 5 cousins. I am now in love with a 7 yr old niece (she sends me letters written in large block print, and her picture is the only one that smiles at me).

I have the same name as 1 grandfather, 3 cousins, 3 nephews, and 1 uncle. The uncle disappeared when he was 15, just took off and caught a freight (they say). He's discussed each year when the family has a reunion, he causes uneasiness in the clan, he is an empty space. My father's mother who is 93 and who keeps the Family Bible with everybody's birthdates (and death dates) in it, always mentions him. There is no place in her Bible for "whereabouts unknown."

2

Each fall the grave of my grandfathers call me, the brown hills and red gullies of Mississippi send out their electric messages, galvanizing my genes. Last yr/ like a salmon quitting the cold ocean---leaping and bucking up his birthstream/ I hitchhiked my way from L.A. with 16 caps in my pocket and a monkey on my back. and I almost kicked it with the kinfolks. I walked barefoot in my grandmother's backyard/ I smelled the old land and the woods/ I sipped cornwhiskey from fruit jars with the men/ I flirted with the women/ I had a ball till the caps ran out and my habit came down. That night I looked at my grandmother and split/ my guts were screaming for junk/ but I almost consented/ I had almost caught up with me.
(The next day in Memphis I cracked a croaker's crib for a fix.)



This yr there is a gray stone wall damming my stream, and when
the falling leaves stir my genes, I pace my cell or flop on my bunk
and stare at 47 black faces across the space. I am all of them,
they are all of me, I am me, they are thee, and I have no sons
to float in the space between.

from *Poems From Prison*
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