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April 8, 2020

Drops of Water

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Abstract

Drops of Water by Michelle Oppong-Ampofo

This work was created as a condensation of heartbreak. Through many observations and implications of patriarchy, violence, and sexuality, the primary speaker realizes how often societal norms fail and exclude her. The book is split into 3 locations—Kumasi, Ghana; Newark, New Jersey; and Paris, France— as the speaker uses the relocation in the hopes of changed circumstances. Ultimately, the book discusses the different crisis of womanhood, blackness, and ultimately, Americanness.

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Kumasi, Ghana

After Grandfather's Funeral

The Aduana people carry lanterns
through dawn before anyone else
in the world lifts from sleep. We huddle
around each other, count breath,
crouch to keep heat.

My aunt pushes her hand deep into the batter,
crushes away the tiny pockets of white flour.
Here, she says, giving me the bucket of orange
extract, *pour slowly like you have sense*.
My grandmother echoes from the veranda,
careful, with a neem stick in her mouth.

My uncle stands at the foot of the cashew.
He mashes up the day's old drop doughnuts
and pours them under the tree for the yellow canaries.
They eat the insects that set on the cashew.

My aunt presses doughnuts down into the oil.
They come up round, bumping into each other, forming circles.

After School

We drive circles around the lot, hoping
to outwait a man who climbed into the back
of my aunt's Volkswagen at the yoghurt shop,
brackish, balding and sweaty. He tells us
the rocks he likes most. Phyllite, bauxite,
serpentinite. My cousins and I sit dressed.
Girls in blue skirts, boys in shorts, my red
T-bar shoes sewn up by shoeshines.
The man talks about university picnics.
How they took off their shoes and stomped
into water, holding onto the reeds. Later,
they took pictures that stand on mantels
along their weddings. Asks my aunt if
she recalls. She perches her lips in quiet
agreement, staring into the rearview mirror.
When my uncle arrives, he pries the door open,
pulls the man out, tells him to go home before he
takes over the driver's seat. We sit in silence,
shifting gaze from my uncle's single and only arm
on the driving wheel to my aunt's face.

Grandmother Instructs on how to Build Temples

You now have Jesus with you.

Pink sweater, blue slippers, and wet blood
between my thighs my grandmother
instructs me on ways of building temples.

I know all about buildings. How people pack them
in the backwaters of minds. How long to wait
for the cement to dry.

I follow my grandmother's blueprints in the air, turn
where she bends, straighten where she pulses.

She shows me how to balance the world
on a coal pot. How to snatch that silver pot
from the fire with bare hands but careful
not to burn the fingers I must use to smooth
the knots on a man's head before we mate.

I know this too. I've seen the women in the compound
practice in the mornings before sun. They lay their hands
on the men, pull the sick out of them, make the men
cry with relief. I am red with wanting to know
where my man and his knots are. She shakes
my mouth open and slides boiled eggs in. *Careful*
don't bite your sons. Forget the red,
I will paint you a beautiful blue.

Bragoro

In my uncle's cerulean room poked with turpentine,
a man painted the walls and I lay watching tv,
when he stopped and touched my spine.
Counted the crevices aloud, then pushed
down to feel how much resistance each held.
The coldness pulled at my fingers so I couldn't
offend him. He drew circles on my neck, shoulders, chest.
Such careful quiet deforestation.
Pail water, his overalls streaked with blue lines, the hard
work of getting me to like his dry touch, my tears.
When I turned and looked out the louvres, Aberewaⁱ
was sitting on the cashew, sifting through palm nuts.
The divination was clear. I would fall into cobalt deep earth.

Occupation

Don't you know
they found me barefoot too?
Skin patches of blue,
my arms dead with water
from the blue earth I laid in.

When they pulled me up, I slapped
a boy so hard he went cross-eyed.
When asked about it I lied. It felt
like the thing to do after a long day.
It was the only thing I could do to a boy.

Now between my fingers, I hold
this boy. Each month a ripening
face that falls away for a new one.
He writes over my words,
covers my thoughts with old white lace.
Here, he says, is penance.

Friday Nights are For Spanish Telenovelas

Saturday afternoons for African movies.

I am most like Valentina Villanueva Lanz de Sevilla.

She wears the same shoes as me, but she has the potential for real beauty. When she got poisoned with a box of chocolates she cried, then came back thinner and vengeful.

I am least like Maafia from Princess Tyra. She sat poised, waiting for malice to leave. Bleats and tears do nothing for me when we line up to get lashed for failing tests but bring taunt. The canes, fat or thin, cut through the air just as quick.

I Stick My Hand on Palm Nut Trees to Feel

what Jesus did. If thorns could make him
cry out, then palm nut trees can give release.

But in school, friends pull out the thorns
and read the lines in my palms. They say
the lines will lead to prophesy. How many
children I can curate in my body. One boy
who sells toffees in front of the cracked walls
of the urinals places my hands side by side,
says it's nothing but the fallopian tubes pressed
down the length of them.

When I spread my hands on my drawing board
and measure spaces with a tee-square, my lines
are never straight. We draw out block wall
measurements. 10x8x8 and 10x12x15
The many houses in perfect rows, the walls
with green green moss.

Water Rationing

Water runs over these rocks under the house. No one loved
this water more than my grandmother. She'd let the neighbors
in, buckets strapped to their arms, fingers caressing
the bottom.

As they crossed the plank bridge, she'd pull me
close and say, *you can always tell who doesn't know
how to collect water by the pieces of shales at the bottom
of their buckets. Men of Gideon!* But I hear,
Shales show you everything. Watch.

I dropped a piece into my bucket and began to whisper my name.
My grandmother called out for me and I answered with her name.
I looked down, the shale had sunk to the bottom,
rippling circles on the water.

Cardiomyopathy sounds softer than a 10 o'clock stroke. No one loved
this stream more than my grandmother. Sometimes I take her out
there and point out rocks. She shakes her head.
The water does not move.

Letter to Mother***January 17th***

The family waits for an earthquake.

I pray for the ocean far far away

to split open, let the water

seep through the cracks

of the earth. Then I could trek

through the mud cracks

all the way from here to New York

where the red and blue

and buildings are stacked.

I swear I would crawl.

After Grandmother's Funeral

The cashew tree is old and bends, facing down. Yellow canaries
like to eat unripe cashews the most. My uncle, tired of it, takes an axe
to its dry trunk.

I watched the axe swab the air and land mute in the softwood. Every two
swings, he'd set the head of the axe in the earth,
repositioning the handle into his grasp.

In the end, he got only partway through the trunk, the sap running
slowly across the cut. By the next week, half of the tree had withered.
Now the birds only eat cashews from one side of the tree.

Newark, New Jersey

Call Me Blatherskite

I wear tantrums on my head like pink mink fur.
10 blocks the police chase and pull us like tangled fur,
our asses always a black blur.

Jerome crossed the street and got shot in the finger.
We practice Baa Baa Black Sheep, g-note under my finger
Ain't a smudge on me, no, I'm just a bit of a drinker.

Gin, tonic, Arizona iced tea, gummy worms, rocks,
sometimes I lie still as a mouse dead on rocks.
They'll never see the back of this flathead round the block.

They call me little, Debbie, downer, blues on please.
But that ain't me. Call me Blatherskite if you please.
Your own personal racehorse and bet on me bet on me bet on me.

What's More American

than your mama's panties?

Now pink because you put 'em

in with the red? I won't tell.

Is it local man Tony Walker asking

for a dollar? You saying you ain't got

none? Is it the soft freeze you buy

afterward? Picking chocolate over

strawberry? Is it in the store?

Tell me do you like to bite

the cone first and let the chocolate drip?

Do you feel bad?

I'll tell you what it is.

It's a two-hour nap in a chapel.

It's Jesus, Mary and 'em

all staring and frowning slightly,

as white people like to do.

It's a girl with white panties,

ashy knees, and wet cotton socks,

sitting on a pew with her legs spread

out. It's the teacher announcing

that you're making crab tetrizzini in class,

except you don't know what that is.

So you head downtown on bus 13

to the supermarket, where the Latino workers

are told to sell you the crabs alive.

You place them in a brown paper bag

and rush home to put them in a pot,

paper and all, and hope to God they die.

It's cut water gallons in the back

of your mama's car, in case
you need to pee. It's an old white
baby-alive doll, that calls out
Oops, I made an accident.
It's art class where you learn to pass
a white thread through a needle.
You try over and over,
until there's no one left in the room.
And the art teacher huffs and says,
"Give it here."

It's July 1st

and we brought water guns.

We hiding from the grown-ups,

talking about a condom we found

between the cracks of Zachary's house.

We talk about who might be pregnant,

who is on our list for being easy.

Brenda with the tight braids, Inez

with the stepfather, Tammy the girl

I kissed once on a dare. Joy

with the big calves she likes to show off.

We name all the places we've seen condoms

in the sewers, in our parents' closet

in the nurses' office. Darren

says he saw a man put one on

right in front of him. We tell him to stop

making things up.

We giggle when one of us trips

and spills soda on our feet.

It washes the sins away!

And we are left sticky.

It's 1st July and we free in some type of way,

almost swimming towards light.

They Call Me African

Booty scratcher.

It ain't funny Tammy, you know

I've got eczema, landmines
on old irritated skin.

You stick pencils in my back,
draw countries and I let you.

When I don't erupt you write
poems about chocolate and love
and I let you. I even rate you
a 9/10 because I love chocolate.

How can I fight you
when you have your best
blue jeans on? I know what
you want, where you want
to tread. How do I tell you
what you're looking for isn't
in this school, not in the trees
that crack the sidewalk open
behind this school, not at the bus
stop, not on the bus to Jersey City
where you can watch the tides lap
over themselves and come
to nothing at your feet? It's not even here
on my back. But I give you
the shape of something you can want.

A Man Calls My Mother

a dumb black bitch

while she sits in the driver's seat.

She shakes her head for a while,

like a hand trying to lightly

disconnect a plug from its socket.

Then she sighs, steps out

of the car, crosses her arms over

her breast and yells,

“over a parking spot?”

I sink into old leather. Wait for it

to take my hands. Cover me, tightly.

It will hold me safe in a way

she never could.

Imitation Crab

Seafood delight means expired fish.

Christopher Columbus means full of shit.

He came across the great ocean, cut through
the water like a pair of dull scissors, frayed
the fabric, then told everyone he had made
a double-breast silk suit.

Blatherskite say, *Man, it's the white fish
they cut it too thin, the red dye is all wrong too
crab meat don't look like that.*

After School

There are 22 playgrounds around and I've tasted
the sand of 8 of them. I wait till the children are gone
then I hang myself upside down from the monkey bars.
I think of whether to arch my back, hang straight
or wait for the boys to come so my body will know what to do.
I'm never as straight as I want to be. Every day I move
to new playgrounds, practice new lines. Blatherskite say,
Careful motherfucker, don't slip. I can't catch you.

Fridays are for

the 17 minutes into WWE Smackdown and how the lights
on the men's thighs make you sob. They remind
you of the highway behind your apartment,
how the car lights mesh together to make canaries,
darting in and out of dark. You tell the other
girls to go home. Instead, they put you in the bathtub
with your bottle, where you tell them you ache for men
and they turn on the shower. You sing Foolish 15 times.

Apology to Mother

It was my fault. I called him a fish-eyed, can't hold a pencil, Uncle Remus-looking motherfucker first. But only after he said I was ugly. Either way, I'm sorry you had to find out this way, in a freezing car. You couldn't have known you had made something ugly. You knew crabs could not birth birds, but you couldn't have known birds beget crabs sometimesⁱⁱ. Never mind. Here, we'll do what we always do when our car stalls. You push forward and I'll fall back, down, wherever.

Paris, France

ⁱ Goddess associated with fertility; also means old woman.

ⁱⁱ From Akan proverb “A crab does not beget a bird.”

Letter to Mr. Baldwin**June 28**

I am as every bit indecisive here as I am anywhere else. I came into the supermarket at 5, slew through brown eggs, yogurt and crab-fillings down to the cleaning aisle where I stopped, googled every single ingredient to find the difference between bath soap and laundry detergent; it came down to 5 Euros. Then I googled if the difference between the two was important. Shorty bought two eggs, potatoes, a jar of Vaseline and one bar of soap¹. All he was missing was some meat. Potatoes, eggs and beef scramble. He could have eaten, taken a shower, maybe washed his clothes and smeared himself with Vaseline. Instead, he chose to smear it all on Malcolm's head. I sneak my fingers into the refrigerators and massage the meat inside them, poking its occasional fat. It always comes back to this I suppose. Me retracing steps to put things back the way I found them and carrying myself home to water down what little I have. For what it's worth, Shorty was a fine friend.

¹ (Baldwin, One Day When I was Lost : A Scenario based on Alex Haley's "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" 2007)

Letter to Mr. Baldwin**July 1**

Why didn't you wash your own sheets?² I want to think that you didn't have the time or money. It's ok, Mr. Baldwin. At least you refused to sleep on dirty sheets no matter the circumstances. This is something we have in common. On your recommendation, I've been drinking coffee and alcohol since my food ran out. I like to switch between the two every cup. I was very sorry to read that the police arrested you over some sheets. Did you really think your friends wouldn't notice you were missing? I know you wondered, but did you think it? I have rashes on my arms from the laundry detergent I've been using. It's also left curious blue streaks on my sheets. If my friends have noticed they haven't said much. I think it cruel of the police to mistake you for a gangster.

² (Baldwin, Equal in Paris 2012)

Letter to Mr. Baldwin**July 4**

Annette, as I like to call her, steps on asphalt and opens a field of poppies somewhere in my body. They are treacly enough to seal pain. I interrupt to tell you I know how the word treacly rolls, then fall sedimented and cold on the ears, but I want her in place of this soundless solitude. I know how you'll hate it, the sincerity, a bohemian love.ⁱⁱⁱ In my mind, she is out at lunch breaks, legs left out in the summer weeks. I keep watching from my window until I am left feeling unfamiliar. If I knew how to be American, I would feel un-American too^{iv}. I am unable to apologize or pretend to be anything else. You were right. But Annette. She doesn't move, my protest novel. She is left in me like a seed.

Letter to Mr. Baldwin**July 14**

Out in front of the Louvre, lines of African men with selfie sticks, extend them, asking me to buy one or any of their Parisian tokens. One of them reaches out and grabs my sleeve, asking one more time and I set my mouth to say “No, I’m fine.” But I don’t want him to let go of my sleeve. He reminds me of home. You say there is *something beautiful, something awful in the spectacle of a person who has lost one of his faculties as they struggle to regain it*³. I don’t see it that way. My uncle —with carefully rolled up shirt over his stump at the elbow — liked to walk long distances when he didn’t have money. He built ant colonies with twigs, fed birds, gave away money that wasn’t his and always, always washed his hand up to the elbow. When he was doing those things, I would never watch him. He looked most beautiful when he straightened his head and lifted his shoulders, a canary bursting with song and laughter.

³ (Baldwin, *Stranger in the Village* 2012)

Letter to Mr. Baldwin**July 29**

Today Annette walks and the trees shiver in euphoria. To please her they send letters of leaves. She sticks out her hand slow, a leaf out of grace falters and glides into it. I should know better and you've told me so. Sentimentality is always dishonest, cruel even. Six weeks ago, when a leaf fell into my palm, I couldn't crush it. I let it go and I grew old there. Later my hand itched for days. Annette drops the leaf and I turn away from her. Mr. Baldwin where do you keep your pain?

Letter to Mr. Baldwin**August 3**

The sun always knows when you're irritated and shines more forcefully up the back of your head, wishing you would say something. Three days since she appeared below my window and I held her closely, as I could from a three-story apartment looking down. I said my goodbye in private then bawled in a bar. Now, I walk with these block heels strapped to my feet, nudging me to turns and pauses on the boulevard. I take the shape of an average woman and hold my bag tight, bottle loosely. My heels sink into the filthy sidewalks and break off, leaving me barefoot with neck burning underneath my kinky twists. Sometimes when I'm alone, I take a paddle brush I bought on a whim and sit in my room pressing down and releasing. Each gush of air a heartbeat, a sigh.

Letter to Mr. Baldwin**August 6**

Words can come out so wrong. Hands in a dark night. A mother's hands drawn out of water, the white suds swaying. I am trying my hardest to undo words. I will apologize the way men taught me. We all squeeze anyways, press and fold ourselves, flattening ourselves on stained sheets. What are we hiding? What are we willing to give away? Balzac wrote like a mad man. Do you think he knew which parts he wanted to keep away? Or did he touch everything and every part and then paddle towards one? Did he sit in his office, his hands soaked in the water, waiting for fingers to find their grip?

Letter to Mr. Baldwin**September 15**

Mr. Jack Spicer says I've overstayed, hat I only write to you to hear myself think, to hope that someone else might see and mistake me for a longing soul^{4v}. Like most other people I have a hard time. Letting paper boats float away, I would always chase them, stretching out my hands, because they would need me. And so, they always came back. Recently, I cannot get a scent off me. Selsun blue has stained my shower from repeated shampooing, but still, when I go out, my scalp surges with sweat and I am left walking into people, a clean pungent smell.

⁴ (Spicer 1957)

Letter to Mr. Baldwin**November 17**

I got myself a crepe. No trimmings. I thought it would be alright to allow myself that. The crepe was thinner than I expected and there was not nearly enough sugar. After that, I went to the Saint Eustache cathedral. Eustace was burned for believing too hard. The cathedral was burned down twice because it stood for nothing. You once wrote *Europeans had killed off enough artists to know that they are persistent as rain, snow, taxes, or businessmen.*⁵ Or churches. I can't remember if I prayed or what I prayed about. I waited until the dark to go people-watching. It is the only time it is ok to be a tourist. When you came to Paris with \$40, what did you think you were going to spend it on? If I had \$40, I would buy a secondhand t-shirt that said Princeton lacrosse, an umbrella, spam meat, earphones, and deodorant. I would never buy a book if I could help it. They take you anywhere but home.

⁵ (Baldwin, *The Discovery of What It Means to be an American* 1961)

Letter to Mr. Baldwin**November 18**

I finally saw Carmen Jones. I see why you hate it^{vi}. I saw it twice. I can't judge the past the way you judged your present. I felt sorry for Rum Daniels, though. Frankie knows things. How have you been?

Letter to Mr. Baldwin

December 18

There is a quietness with trains that go long distances. Stretching like black tar. When you go in far enough, you'll see other people who dwell in silence. Pull themselves out of their small beds and small houses, every space miniature from sucking up the leftover noise. The mother pushes away the curtain and stares. Past her, the father is setting up a table of breakfast under a yellow warm light. You stare and you almost lose yourself until the train zips past it and now there is a different family.

Notes

ⁱ Goddess associated with fertility; also means old woman.

ⁱⁱ From Akan proverb "A crab does not beget a bird."

ⁱⁱⁱ Mr. Baldwin writes in *Autobiographical Notes* that he does not like bohemia, or anyone who is earnest about anything. He wants to be a "honest man and a good writer."

^{iv} In Baldwin's essay "The Discovery of What it Means to be an American," Baldwin writes that American artists begin to feel un-American in the European environment where they do not have to apologize for themselves.

^v In the Introduction of Jack Spicer's *After Lorca*, "Lorca" writes "the letter one poet writes to another not in any effort to communicate with him, but rather as a young man whispers his secrets to a scarecrow, knowing that his young lady is in the distance listening."

^{vi} In Baldwin's essay "Carmen Jones: The Dark is Light Enough," he expresses his disdain for the movie's portrayal of black people and their singing.

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