


# When The Trees Speak, The Land Remembers



Eerily quiet yet souls hymned for me.  
I knew I was getting closer, to  
My love because dem heat waves, and rays pierced me, and  
Fields of white lined the street.  
From dust you come, to it you must return, I remember,  
Baptist sermons and stained glass, and no AC and carpet with stains  
And fans with the face of the pastor, sometimes  
My aunt would sit next to me,  
Rockin' back and forth, moaning for the lord, blues settled over her face as if she had the flu,  
As if to soothe herself, a crazed woman is how I saw her.  
But today,  
This time,  
She sat in a three-pound bag.  
And I saw her no more.

My eyes, low from salty, wet weight, caressed it, thick  
With emotion. How was I supposed to forget this?  
A woman who was larger than life,  
Sported a mean Michael Jackson-esque jerry curl,  
Laughed like she lived in a Katt Williams standup, and  
Loved like how you're supposed to do your neighbor,  
Reduced to dust that can fit in my  
Palm Oil, native to West and Central Africa, is often red,  
much like the clay of Blakely, Georgia.  
That kind of orangey red, like the sun too.  
Taken from and tormented under.  
The land remembers the identity of those who worked it.

My uncle dug a shallow hole near their mother's resting place, pouring her in.  
We fear Christ, so we swore no deity, but libations flow.  
My auntie was a thirsty woman, an alcoholic in proper terms here on earth.  
So we gave her a final drank.  
Ain't no alcohol in heaven, I know it.

I had to soothe myself, or else I would become crazed just like her,  
The blues like no other, a frog in my throat, so I rocked myself  
But I can't cry in front of my momma, she needs her strength  
Though maybe it's me, I tend to over-exaggerate my importance, but  
Dem souls humbled me.

I seen those trees, you know?  
Dem ones from the history books, where black bodies swang  
Sway, like magnolias in the summer evening, so I knew that  
I was getting closer, fragmented stones that became my heart  
Broke with dem heated rays. Thorned Atlas cursed to uphold the king,  
Cotton, for all of eternity, turned his wrath on my people.  
Cuttin', stickin', pokin' anyone who was forced to disturb him.  
He was dead, though, brittle too, like someone had cursed him back,  
Red was the clay that lay ahead. How couldn't I cry?

My dearest uncle, dark-complexioned, recounted a story of his naive boyhood:  
Redneck cop, voice thickened with the accent of a country singer, lookin' for trouble, with two  
black boys in the dawnish fog.  
Except there was only one black boy, let me tell it, two in the eyes of Mr. Jim Crow.  
*"Boy, do you know where you at?"* That officer smugged.

They were in Southwest Georgia, late 60s.

How could you answer that question?  
How would you answer that question?  
Why was that a question?  
That was rhetorical, just like that cop's question; you don't answer that.  
How'd you tell a white man that you were also a man?

Here?

Then?

You didn't, or else you'd be a strange fruit.

Marveled at, cackled at. Recognize, don't reminisce. Ain't shit worth ponderin' on.

Not when that King, Cotton, stared at you, waved at you while danger stood in your face.

*"We jus' headin' to my town, sir. Blakely, sir. We visitin', sir."* Granddaddy uttered.

Sir.

Sir.

Sir.

Sir, Motherfuckin' sir.

My granddaddy was never one to be challenged. I remember bits of him.

He stood his ground, and damn was he good at it.

A "G" in modern terms knew what needed to be done and did it.

But even Satan knows better than to test Michael,  
A fool doesn't know how to chose it battles,  
My granddaddy? Was never who we'd consider "Boo-Boo."

The cop, now elated at this polite nigga's etiquette, split his face upward:  
He remembered his place.  
"Boy, *this ain't no time for you to be travelin'*, Boy." Mr. Redneck smugged again.  
Boy.  
Boy.  
Boy.  
Boy, Stupid ass Boy.

It was misty, no Sarah Vaughn, and dawn. Sun playing peekaboo through bands of clouds.

"*I thought I was ya boy, daddy?*" A snagged tooth, Abdean Jr questioned.  
He feigned curiosity; his father just hoped he wouldn't become the cat.  
God bless a child's innocence, for they see the good in anyone.  
God bless my granddaddy, for he had just been saved.  
Though to him, danger stared his son in the face and only the posture of its heart (& God's grace) could save them both.  
That danger cocked its head to the side, as if it weighed a thought, conflicted—  
"*Lay back down, son, remember what I said.*" Is all my granddaddy could say.  
Danger let them go,  
but that story, that experience, continued to hold them captive.

And now me.  
Haunting me.  
Taunting me as I drove through Southwest Georgia.  
Paralyzing me, as I recognized that there may have been a chance  
I would've never heard this story.  
Nor met my uncle  
Nor met my granddaddy.  
Praise God for their protection.

Rage wasn't how I felt, no way, not when that eerie quiet had a way to,  
Remind you of your place.  
That's the day I learned that that second boy was a sharecropper who  
Ran. Setting the clay below him ablaze, with only a third-grade education to accompany him  
I adore his resilience, maybe his wisdom, because that's exactly  
How I remembered my great-granddaddy, I hadn't remembered, whether he  
Was mean or stern, strict maybe?  
He died long ago, yet lived forty-one years past his wife.  
He survived Mr. Jim Crow, but he saw this as his greatest grievance.  
Raising six kids on his own, becoming a citrus man in hopes of breaking even,

Having to raise your kids in a home in central Florida,  
you once shared with your heart outside your body,  
Memories of said heart apparent in the faces of your children.  
His Creole love. Sa Belle, Josephine.

Anywho, here we were, driving those same paved roads he once had  
I knew we were getting closer because  
A ghost mist, both melancholy and somber, settled over our car  
Ironically, the blues lingered indefinitely and faintly,  
Negro spiritual hymns seemed to rattle my spirit, outlines  
Of what seemed like ghostly black bodies, took up organic space in my mind,  
How blessed am I to reap the benefits of their labor?  
How unfortunate of me to be burying their descendant.

Pecans.  
Walnuts.  
Peaches.  
And Oaks.

All trees that waved at me and tangoed with the wind,  
Paid the Sun no never mind, and often fancied me.  
I was flattered til' I wasn't, til' they spoke. Told me to be careful.  
Told me that the state line was a time portal, so be careful.  
Told me that they were record keepers on behalf of God, griots.  
I ain't believe them, no way, until I remembered.  
Every house I've lived in, I've had either a pecan, walnut, oak, or  
Palm tree in its backyard.  
*Be careful*, is what the Holy Spirit said. My bad, Father!

I stopped the car on the way back to my lovely Florida.  
I had to confront that king, Cotton.

From dust we come, to it we must return,  
That's what the trees said, and that's what the land remembers.  
Ironically, though, it wasn't them who reminded me, it was  
That eerie quiet—  
that made sure to keep me in my place.