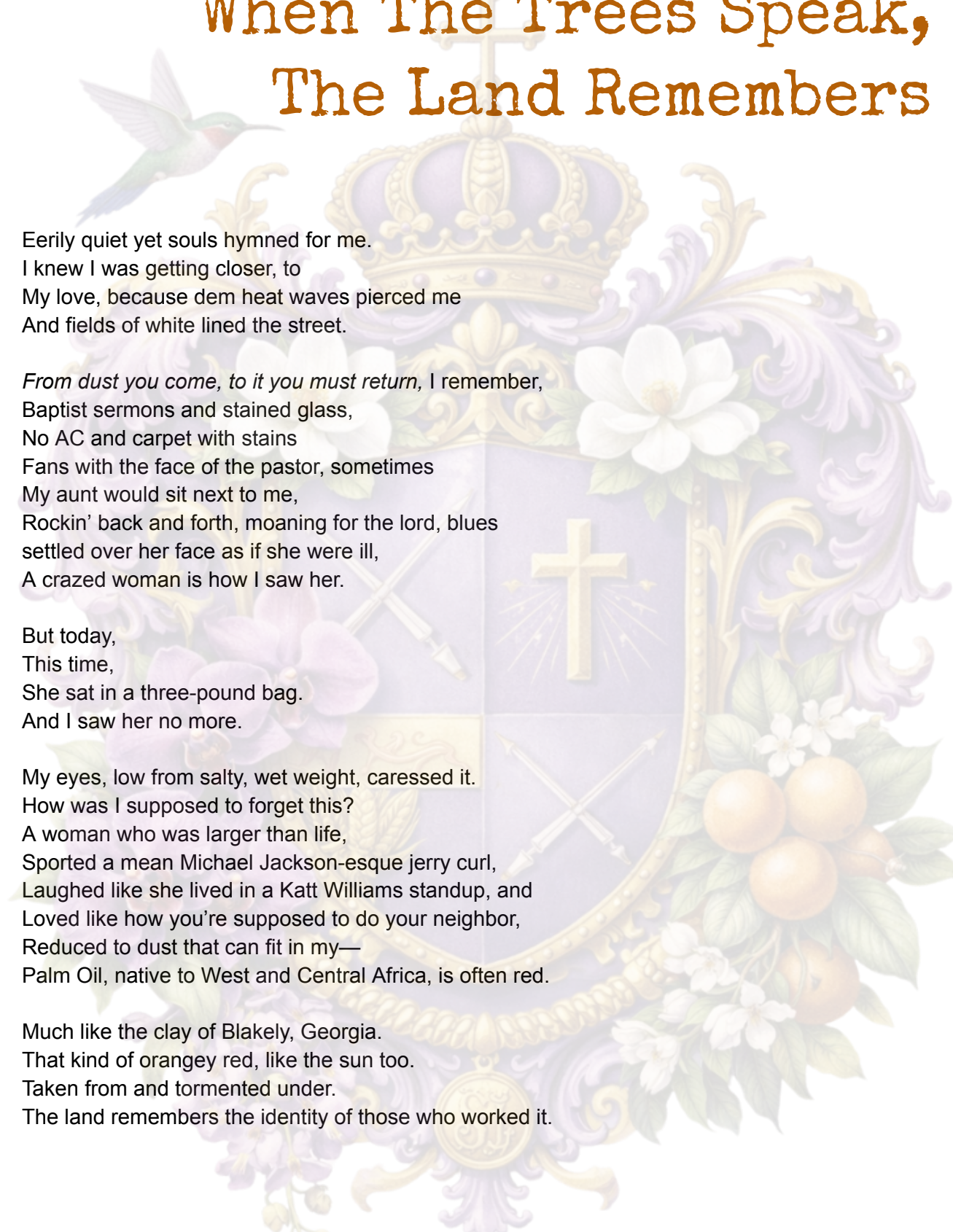


When The Trees Speak, The Land Remembers



Eerily quiet yet souls hymned for me.
I knew I was getting closer, to
My love, because dem heat waves 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,
No AC and carpet with stains
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 were ill,
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.
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,
And poured his sister in.
We fear Christ, so we swore no deity, but libations flow.
My aunt was a thirsty woman,
An alcoholic in proper terms here on earth.
I had to soothe myself, or else I would become crazed just like her,
Rocking myself, I felt the blues grip me.
Something about this eerie quiet was the reason.

Those trees. You know the ones.
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.

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.
Green was the trees that spoke.
My dearest uncle, dark-complexioned,
Recounted a story of his naive boyhood that went like this:

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 would you've answered that?
Why had he asked that?
Wasn't it obvious?
And "Boy"?
How'd you tell a white man that you were also a man?
There.
Then.
Trick question. You didn't. Or else you'd become strange fruit.

Marveled at, cackled at.
Yanked on, for the picking.
Cut, probed, stuck.
All because you'd forgotten your place.
But how could you?
When that King, Cotton, taunted you,
Waved at you while danger stood, staring you in your face.
And God tried his best to get through to it for your safety.

"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.
But even Satan knows better than to fight God.
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.

The sun played peekaboo through bands of clouds.
Mist settled onto the mossy green ground.

"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.
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
That I would've never heard this story. Nor met my uncle, 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 adult 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, but
He died long ago, yet lived forty-one years past his wife.

Anywho, here we were,
Driving those same paved roads he once had.
I knew we were there because—
A ghost mist, both melancholy and somber, settled over our car.

Ironically, the blues lingered faintly in our car,
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.
All trees that waved at me and tangoed with the wind,
Paid the Sun no never mind.

I was enthralled 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.
From dust we come, to it we must return,
That's what the trees said, and that's what the land remembers.

Though it wasn't them who reminded me, it was
That eerie quiet that made sure to keep me in my place.