

# New Poetry by Sherrie Fernandez-Williams

she be like, damn

she be all tired.  
she be like a flattened house shoe  
she be full of compunction  
she be remembering what was said.  
she be told what she deserves.  
she be believing everybody.  
she be weepin' in the bathtub  
she be like her momma,  
she be lying.  
she be saying it's the arthritis  
she be talking like it ain't her head  
she be actin' like hurt don't bother her.  
she be actin' like she foolin' somebody.  
she be foolin' no damn body.  
she be scattered.  
she be slidin' across marbles.  
she be grabbin' onto nothin  
she be almost breakin' her wrists.  
she be lying on the floor  
she be holdin' her stomach  
she be trying not to vomit soggy cake  
she be wishin' she ate almonds instead.  
she be losin'.  
she be wantin' rest.  
she be told she ain't gettin' shit she want  
and she be still wantin' shit.



Annibale Caracci, circa 1580s.

## **juanita**

juanita put on her tap shoes and danced in her kitchen, in her living room, she composed. and into her gilded bathroom mirror, she gave monologues before powering on her home recorder that, in those days, weighed a sailor's duffel bag.

debuted films at thanksgiving, after feeding a houseful. she, in a form-fitting black dress made of sturdy garbage bags.

"i am more than wife, mother of ten, church organist."

then, she started with captain and tennille, followed by neil diamond.

nieces, nephews elated. her children feigned embarrassment, but devotees, nonetheless.

a woman from disbanded and reshuffled peoples. owned by a garden variety, bearing traces of many countries, the dominant, the birthplace of black magic.

what might have been if they hadn't made us afraid of our gods? she could have been another brooklyn starlet, sing stormy weather like lena horne in the movies. what *if* we harnessed the power of our goddesses?

you favor her. nearsighted. prone to excessive pounds in mid-life, obsessed with communing with the dead. her grandfather, angel, the cuban cigar maker, joined in the chorus of *guantanamera*, and when she strummed like memphis minnie, nada, rocked back and forth

the way grandmothers do when they are stirred. all principle and heart—that one. sung *time in a bottle* with sam, her second husband. sam on guitar, juanita at piano. time was a real question for those graying lovers. never enough time for a woman whose first husband tried to reduce her like soup stock. being mad took more time than she could give. so she produced.

wrote about an urgency for peace, though we were not the ones who begged for war but in 1984 she scribbled in "jesse." argued about the virtues of speaking one's mind to punks who called it a wasted vote.

you hold onto the ways that you might be like juanita, though you know you are dot's child.

in a family large enough populate three small towns. you  
were never one to be known in these townships. not like  
aunty,  
who mailed everyone copies of her latest records,  
performed at all family gatherings, taught whosoever will how  
to play.

when there are so many, there are so many to lose.  
juanita wept the longest over all bodies—ah, yes,  
another way you are like her. your spirit, too, is made  
of blown glass. at the last burial before her own,  
she warned those within the sound of her voice that she was  
tired.

you were young but old enough to know the weight of words.

juanita is a starlet. it is time for another moment under  
glaring lights.

it is quiet on the set, a recreation of 1943. she is small-  
wasted again,  
and in high heels. she looks directly into the camera, then  
up,  
when studio rain hits her face.

## **hot tea**

precious one, emancipate your feet. stretch  
your soles from here to far from here,  
across acres of african moons.  
young dignitary, miles of highway  
know the impression of your shoe  
by heart. it is tender at your core.  
the injured hum their names in  
your ear like seraphim. faces soaked  
up by the cortex for sight cannot  
be unseen like the ground where  
they last stood cannot not absorb

a life poured out. this agony, you  
haul with all subtle movements  
and speak at movements of  
national proportions. in squares,  
your voice expands beyond  
itself and crescendos into a whispers.  
hot chamomile with lemon and honey  
will help. i have prepared this for you.  
sit as we remember our future. rest  
until you are well again. and you  
will be well again to move us further.

## **tony**

this father's son is loved not only by this father  
but by the holy angels too, and by a few demons  
who step to him on the street to give him what-up  
jabs on the shoulder. i do not mean to compare  
this father's son to the son of the father, but that is  
what this father's son had been to sisters.

one came to him at night spooked by utterances  
in her own head. one saved for him her best jokes.  
another came when broken by a boy. the last placed her  
report cards on the table just before he sat down to eat.  
all waited for his perfect response, better than imagined.

to sisters, this father's son was close to the son of the  
father  
when this father/a daddy departed. not to be with the father,  
but to be with a woman he met in night school.

to sisters, the one who gabs with the unseen, the formerly  
broken,  
now zealot, the first to die, a comedian and especially, the  
last,  
the critic of religious patriarchy, who loved showing off

her report card, this father's son, a shepherd. for that  
moment  
in time, sisters, not yet knowing what else they could be,  
were lamb.

## **inflammation**

1.

something almost remembered  
then, pushed away for a later date  
only to find its way into the body, dawdle there  
and hope to be recognized, assessed, sifted through  
for what good it carries, then separated from its waste.

if left alone for too long it splinters  
into the convolution gray matter  
latching onto cells weakening them

sometimes it arrives as a simple question  
while listening to gossip radio, while not  
wanting to be bothered by anything too  
onerous like separating sewage from my  
cells while driving home from a hard-day's work

the words link together and i remove them  
like a chain from the bottom of my belly,  
straight out of my mouth—

“what do i do with the men?”

2.

i know what the question means.  
you get rid of them. i said “rid” motherfucker, rid of you.  
praise be to—  
well, not all of them, of course.  
i love daddy. he was forty when I was born.  
when i turned forty i was the adult daughter.

tenacious. never falling apart for too long, anyway  
since enacting my three day rule  
three days to be dumbfounded, three  
days to panic, three days to flounder  
full recovery occurs on the fourth day.  
too goddamn much to do to flounder four whole days.

so by the fourth day I am fortified,  
and so daddy shares with  
one part regret, one part pride  
in his accomplishments of bedding women  
sometimes a handful in one weekend. some  
served with him on neighborhood watch. most  
were the mothers of the pta, he was president, and  
a poor man with classical tones resounding from his  
long, thick cords; like blues from a cello  
and, women moved to the sound of him.  
bed became a verb that broke my mother.  
but she's dead now, so what does it matter. daddy's nearly  
ninety.  
growing older provides perspective. distance  
dilutes notions about what to do with the men.

3.

the question is absurd.

4.

there were four of us girls. i was the baby.  
the others had me by eight, ten, and eleven  
years so i benefitted from my sisters' skill in hair braiding  
and designing clothes. my favorite was the red jumpsuit with  
shoulder ruffles. i looked like a five year old disco queen  
the day i wore it for my birthday. one sister picked my hair  
out.

i do not blame any of them for their lack of warning

about life in a girl's body; the ownership some feel they have.

to take without permission. they never spoke of rape by the neighbor or by nana's boyfriend. "it's just the way it was," one sister told me. "it was our job to be okay."

I do not want to answer. I'm done being a traitor  
It is difficult to defend this place where I enter the story.  
I am middle aged, not a helpless girl.

real women grow up and care for the most devastated among us  
and I already decided a long time ago that I would be the giver  
not the taker of care. not the interminably wounded  
and, I love a woman so what does any of this matter to an old dyke like me?  
feminine discomfort is an act of treason.

5.

I know the forces against my man-child—

6.

the one long gone was the easiest of all.  
a stack of papers, a hearing or two, the crack of a gavel  
and it was done. i did not wish a brother dead.  
and every day, i am reminded, i forgive him and  
every day i am reminded, i am the one who is sorry.

7.

i have chosen the path of the giver.

Shh...i will only say this once. do not repeat this to anyone.  
the leading cause of death for  
young black women between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five  
is intimate partner  
violence. *Four times greater for black than it is for white.*



*The consequences for  
perpetrators of intimate violence is less when the victim is  
black than when she is white.  
shh... i will only say this twice. the leading cause of death  
for young black women between  
the ages of fifteen and thirty-five is intimate partner  
violence. one last time, i will say, the  
leading cause of death for young black women between the ages  
of fifteen and thirty-five is  
intimate—*

Brie Golec trans woman of color stabbed by her father,  
Yazmin Vash Payne trans woman of color stabbed by her  
boyfriend,  
Ty Underwood trans woman of color shot by her boyfriend  
within days of each other—  
debbie and i once made soup out of dirt and rain.  
as teens, she had ramell. i had an on again,  
off again, thing with jesus. between debbie and ramell,  
were ramell's hands that behaved any which way they pleased  
especially when clenched into spherical solids.  
my hands secured notes in white envelopes.  
"god loves you," my hands told the pen to tell the paper  
to tell debbie. no wonder debbie cut her eyes at me  
whispered loud enough for me to hear her talk about my  
whack old lady clothes to the other girls. ramell and i both  
lost  
the battle against our powerless hands. i was outcasted.  
ramell and debbie made a baby.  
when debbie's little brother became a teen his hand held heavy  
steel to the face of his pretty boo across the street. when  
the steel  
exploded with one motion of a rogue finger little brother's  
hand  
brought the steel to his own face. however, that time the  
rogue finger  
refused. it triggered the same dumb ass question.

long before any documents were filed, i recognized  
the man i married had hands like ramell,

but the righteous knows what's up.

race matters. gender belongs to somebody else.

i know men who want to reclaim their innocence.

deemed guilty without due process. I will speak their cause,  
but speaking mine would perhaps pose a conflict of interest  
as

the earth collapses between us.

8.

the body becomes inflamed in the protection  
of itself swelling occurs while the question is held in the  
nerves.

i sit on the floor of my bedroom and in four square breathing  
i release the question back out into the air to revisit at a  
later date

man-child barely knocks. i struggle to my feet. open the  
door.

taller than me, he lowers his head to my shoulder. "goodnight  
mom,"

he says. n four counts, i release the question and hold him.

i hold him as the question finds its way back into my body.

demands to be answered demands to be answered demands to be  
answered demands to be answered demands to be answered demands  
to be—shhh.... do not repeat this to anyone.