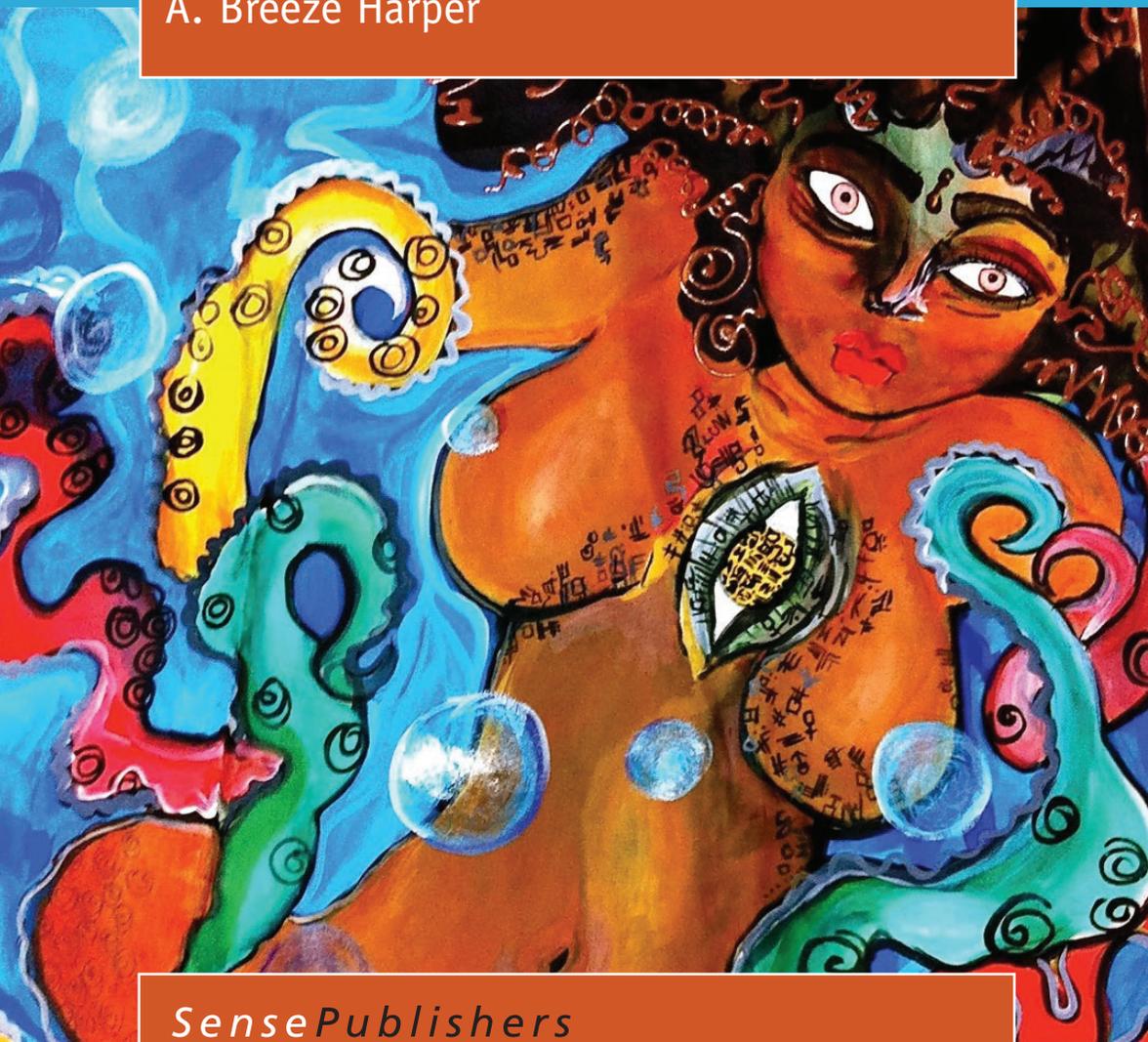


S O C I A L F I C T I O N S S E R I E S

Scars

**A Black Lesbian Experience
in Rural White New England**

A. Breeze Harper



SensePublishers

SCARS

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Scars

*A Black Lesbian Experience
in Rural White New England*

By

A. Breeze Harper

University of California, Davis, USA & The Sistah Vegan Project



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PREFACE

Scars is a novel about whiteness, racism, and breaking past the normative boundaries of heterosexuality, as experienced through eighteen year old Savannah Penelope Sales. Savannah is a Black girl, born and raised in a white, working class, and rural New England town. She is in denial of her lesbian sexuality, harbors internalized racism about her body, and is ashamed of being poor. She lives with her ailing mother whose Emphysema is a symptom of a mysterious past of suffering and sacrifice that Savannah is not privy to. When Savannah takes her first trip to a major metropolitan city for two days, she never imagines how it will affect her return back home to her mother ... or her capacity to not only love herself, but also those who she thought were her enemies. *Scars* is about the journey of friends and family who love Savannah and try to help her heal, all while they too battle their own wounds and scars of being part of multiple systems of oppression and power. Ultimately, *Scars* makes visible the psychological trauma and scarring that legacies of colonialism have caused to both the descendants of the colonized and the colonizer ... and the potential for healing and reconciliation for everyone willing to embark on the journey.

As a work of social fiction born out of years of critical race, Black feminist, and critical whiteness studies scholarship, *Scars* engages the reader to think about USA culture through the lenses of race, whiteness, working-class sensibilities, sexual orientation, and how rural geography influences identity. What makes this novel unique is its emphasis on Black and lesbian teen experience of whiteness and racism within rural geographies. Often, interrogations of whiteness and socio-economic class are left out of popular LGBTQ literature. My intention with *Scars* is to fill this gap by creating emotionally intense dialogues among four primary characters: Savannah Penelope Sales, Davis Allen, Esperanza Perez, and Erick Roberts.

Davis Allen is one of Savannah's best friends. A straight white male who grew up on a rural dairy farm in Savannah's home

town, Davis and Savannah have been close friends since they were toddlers. Davis is the only white friend Savannah has ever chosen to develop a close friendship with. When Davis and Savannah interact with each other, the intimacies of their conversations reveal an interesting dynamic: Davis's perception of reality manifests from what Savannah has marked as "a privileged point of entry": white, male, lower-middle class, and straight. Davis can never experience Savannah's embodied experience as a Black lesbian. Growing up in a country that has institutionally legitimized whiteness and heterosexuality as 'normal', Davis's white and straight identity limits him to superficially interpreting Savannah's verbal hostility as nothing more than stereotypical "angry Black female" banter.

The second theme developed in *Scars* is the irreconcilable differences that Erick Roberts and Savannah endure in their rocky new friendship. Erick and Savannah both identify as same gender loving, however, that is where similarities between them end. Their frequent antagonistic verbal intercourses deconstruct the common myth that being gay or lesbian means they will instantly connect emotionally to each other as comrades in the same battle against homophobia. The exhaustive energy it takes for both to maintain their volatile relationship has its roots in Erick's oblivion to the fusion of his upper-middle class status and his white male privilege when attempting to advise Savannah about being and coming out as a [Black, poor, and rural] lesbian.

The third and more subtle theme developed in *Scars* centers on how Savannah's perception of oppression is positioned within a geopolitically global North perspective. Savannah never acknowledges her privilege as a USA national; only her *lack* of privileges as a non-white person. She considers herself revolutionary in thought in comparison to the people living in the provincial town she grew up in. Simultaneously, she has no awareness of her perpetuation of inequality outside of the USA; for example, Savannah is unaware of how many people of color outside of the USA are exploited so she can buy cheap coffee, chocolate, and Coca-Cola. Esperanza Perez, a key character, is one of her best friends. Esperanza, a vegan and fair trade anti-globalization activist who

originally grew up in Guatemala, visits Savannah from college. Through honest and heartfelt dialogues with Esperanza, Savannah's oblivious understanding of her geopolitical Northern privilege is revealed. I hope to engage the reader to empathize with Savannah's realistic struggles with "whiteness as the invisible norm in the USA," while also addressing the need for Savannah to engage deeper into social injustice by encompassing and linking Black struggles and USA racism to a broader range of social and ecological inequalities throughout the world.

Born out of my Dartmouth College thesis social research in feminist geography, award winning Masters work at Harvard University, and my dissertation work at the University of California-Davis, *Scars* emphasizes how rural geographies of whiteness can impact the consciousness and young identity development of non-white youth who seemingly 'don't belong' in rural settings of whiteness and hetero-normativity; yet, the reader sees during Savannah's trip to her first major metropolitan city, she is very much out of place. Furthermore, Savannah contrasts the mainstream media stereotype that the "authentic Black experience" is from heterosexual Blacks raised in predominantly urban landscapes. Even though the critical theory in this novel has been translated into creative writing format, it is notable that *Scars* was significantly influenced by a strong canon of Black critical thinkers and writers stemming back to W.E.B. DuBois. My choice to title the book *Scars* reflects the legacy of Black anti-colonialist Frantz Fanon and his intense dedication to making visible, the psychological trauma and scarring that colonialism, white supremacy, and racism have caused to both the colonized and the colonizer. Furthermore, this book continues the traditions of bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Octavia Butler who have written extensively about the 'the problem of the color line.' However unlike Fanon and DuBois' more heteronormative and masculinist analyses, hooks, Lorde, and Butler have complicated the 'problem of the color line' with intersectional analysis of gender and sexual orientation.

Scars can be used as a springboard for discussion, self-reflection and social reflection for students enrolled in American Studies, Sociology, Women's Studies, Sexuality Studies, African

PREFACE

American Studies, human geography, LGBTQ studies and critical whiteness studies courses, or it can be read entirely for pleasure.

A. Breeze Harper

PROLOGUE

Once riding in old Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, “Nigger.”

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That’s all that I remember.

—Countee Cullen
“Incident,” 1925¹

“Look at that skinny little nigger.”

First day of school and these words greeted me as I entered the halls of East Lebanon Middle and Senior High school. It had not been the era of Jim Crow nor the Civil Rights Movement in the small town of East Lebanon, Connecticut. There were no ‘for colored only’ signs or separate drinking fountains like during the era of my grandparent’s childhood. However, the n-word had found its way into the year 2000, revealing that as we entered the new millennium, time had little to do with change. This memory reminds me of when hard times would befall our household, Mama used to say with dark sullen eyes, “This too, shall pass.”

Nearly seven years later, I would be lying if I said I didn’t think about that day and that word on a weekly basis. I know, with the utmost confidence, that most brown and Black people will never forget the first time they were verbally assaulted by the n-word.

PROLOGUE

My dark brown hair was in two neatly braided cornrows, weaved by Mama's strong hands. With precise clarity, I can remember what I was wearing, what I was doing, where I was walking to ... and that the sun's brightly shining rays weren't strong enough to warm and repair my crushed twelve year old spirit. My pants were royal blue polyester, a cotton blend with a stretch waistband made by Mama on her antique sewing machine purchased from the local church's weekly summer rummage sale in 1994. I had helped her choose it by pointing it out with my little finger, "She looks so lonely in that little dusty dark corner."

As I walked down those halls that morning, I wore my favorite cotton button-up short-sleeve white shirt, painted with vertical multicolored stripes. Until the n-word had penetrated my small mocha colored ears, my morning had started out with a youthful optimism, inspired by my ride on the bus through the warm late summer rural New England ambiance. I had sat in the back of the bus, clutching my new Hello Kitty thermos, while an inviting sun rose from the East, drenching me, and the rolling green hills, with warm love and fresh renewal.

I had exited the bus and felt like a "big kid." No longer was I, Savannah Penelope Sales, in elementary school. I was in middle school. A smile of pride, eagerness and confidence brightened my thin face as I entered through those creaky lobby metal doors and made my way to find my locker number 156. No more desk to put my stuff in. I had a locker!

As I slowly walked past the art department, in a crowded hallway of high school kids, a young male's voice echoed, "Look at that skinny little nigger."—

—That sound! That unforgettable miserable sound had startled, shocked, and appalled me. Less than the time it takes for a hummingbird to flutter a tiny wing, my smile had been replaced by a trembling lower lip. My chest had tightened and my stomach immediately twisted and turned. I had thought that I would not be able to control my bowels before making it to the closest bathroom. I remember I had nervously turned around to see who had said it. Unfortunately, the halls were crowded and the coward had strategically hidden within a sea of white adolescent faces with

chattering mouths. He had to have been referring to me, for I had been the only Black girl in that ocean of whiteness.

My calm saunter had become a quick-paced and terror-stricken gait. Tear-filled eyes focused on making it through the double doors that partitioned the high school from the middle school. Like clockwork, the coward stung again, “Run skinny little nigger, run.” A sadistic cackle had trailed after his vicious utterance. As I had hurried through the double doors, I remember my small heart had been beating furiously through my chest. It had become increasingly difficult for me to breath and even harder to prevent the tears in my eyes from escaping down my soft cheeks. I remember commanding myself not to have an asthma attack. Foolishly thinking I was “too old” for my inhaler, I had left it underneath my pillow earlier that morning.

“Run skinny little nigger, run,” kept on echoing in my head. Would he take the next step and follow me through those doors? What would he do to me? I’m barely five feet tall, what if he’s really big? What if no one will help me?

Undeniably, the n-word is the worst word in the English language. He had known this, which is why he had been unable to fire it to my face. Seven years later, I have always wondered why none of my schoolmates had heard it. Maybe they had but it simply didn’t incite the petrified terror in them that it did in me. As soon as his vocal cords clamored “nigger” at my back, it instantly connected me to America’s sordidly violent and racist past. My mind had begun to rapidly fire through a memory bank of collective misery: faded photographs of lynched Black bodies surrounded by sadistic grimacing white-faced onlookers; Norman Rockwell’s unforgettable little Black angel in “*The Problem We All Live With*,” *Life* magazine’s portraits of Black people being hosed down and chewed upon by German Shepherd dogs; Langston Hughes’ *Black Misery*; and lastly, the memory of my mama pounding her fist on our kitchen table before I departed for my first day of Kindergarten, “Never let anyone call you a ‘nigger.’ Do you hear me, Savi? You beat that idea out of them if they do.” By the third grade, Mama had made sure that I knew about my people. Our people. The bookcases of our living room were filled with any books and articles about us that she could

PROLOGUE

get her hands on: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*, and Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* to name a few.

Of course my schoolmates had not been terrified of that word. Their whiteness was their security clearance, a pass to a collective amnesia that blessed them with only happy memories of America's "patriotic textbook." I learned immediately that a fair-skinned Jesus and God were protecting them and only them. Their whiteness was my insecurity coupled with the fact that I was the "token" Black girl in our predominantly white blue-collar town.

Most Black people in America have been or will eventually be called the n-word. However, it doesn't make my story any less significant. It's not just a word in the English language.

Sticks and stones ... When I was eight, I broke my arm when my bicycle collided into a slow moving car at the intersection near my home ... *may break my bones ...*

Bones break. They hurt. They heal. However ... *but words will never hurt me ...*

"Nigger" hurts, scars ...

... and never heals.

NOTES

ⁱ Cullen, Countee in *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*. Cary Nelson (Ed.). New York City: Oxford University Press, 2007. Page 530.

PART I: DIS-PACED, DIS-LOCATED

...odydeadbodiesmurderedbodiesimportedbredmutilatedbodiesoldbodiesboughttheEuropeantraffickingbodieshattellingsomuchaboutthemandwhichhelpingfueltheindustrializationofthemetropolisesbodiesbodiescreatingwealththecapitalfeedingtheindustrialrevolutionsmanytime soverandoverandoverthebodies...

Between the legs thespace
/with the womb thespace
colonized like place and space

thesilenceof
thespacebetween
the legs

thesilenceof
thespacewithin
the womb ...

—Marlene Nourbese Philip
“Dis Place”ⁱⁱ

NOTES

- ⁱⁱ Cited from McKittrick, Katherine (2006). *Demonic grounds: Black women and the cartographies of struggle* (p. 48). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

CHAPTER ONE

1993

Pieces of biscuit-brown cocoa butter slowly melt on top of my ashy bruised knees.

As I squirm a bit between the warm confines of Mama's legs she says "I don't understand these little kids. Why do they push my baby around like that? It's kindergarten for god's sake!" We are both silent for about a minute; the only sound I can hear are the three cows mooing across the street from us. I named them Twinkle, Sandy, and Princess. They live inside of a fenced off area right next to Mr. Danielson's tiny blue painted barn that had fallen down last summer. Mama says that Mr. Danielson's sons are too cheap to help him fix it. Sometimes I wish we could live there. Mr. Danielson has lots and lots of land with maple trees. They are my favorite! And I really love that tiny pond with those white ducks.

"Stop moving, please!" she says, pulling the bushy hair on my head, trying to ease it into neat little cornrows. I am wearing the turquoise sequin dress that Mama bought last week. My warm bottom presses against the cool linoleum floor. Mama reaches into the jar of blue greasy goo on the chair beside me. Her fingers pull out a lump of glistening teal. It shimmers slightly underneath the sixty-watt bulb in our dimly lit kitchen.

"Damn, you have the driest scalp. These New England winters sure can leave a negro so ashy!" Mama exclaims, gently rubbing the goo onto my scalp. As a portion of my itchy skin finds salvation under Mama's smooth fingertips, I giggle in relief. For a few seconds, I forget about being pushed into the pavement by Teresa Bateman, earlier that day.

"I don't know why they always push my baby around," she says again. I grab the scratched leg of the wooden chair beside me, and start playing with a shiny screw that Davis' daddy had put in last month to fix it.

"Savannah! Please stop moving so much! This ain't going to make it go faster. Why'd you let that little girl push you like that? Stop moving!" she warns, weaving my hair into one of her unique

patterns. This time she said she'd make a spiral on each side of the part on my head. I hope she doesn't pull them too tightly. I can never sleep good the first night she does it. Last month I couldn't even close my eyes, she had braided them so tightly. Mama's braids were destined to never unravel from my rowdy head.

I reach forward to scratch my tender knee, but before my bitten down fingernails can touch it, Mama says, "If you keep on scratching them they are going to never heal and then they are going to fall off. You know how stupid you're going to look wit' no knees? You be a no knee Negro." My right arm retracts instantly as I try not to envision myself walking to school with no knees. Is that possible?

"Is that too tight?" she asks, as I feel her finishing up the last row. I nod eagerly, hoping she'll unravel them all and start over again, perhaps showing more mercy to my scalp.

"Well, why didn't you say something before, Savi?"

"I don't know."

"Well, they'll loosen up in a day or two. Now, stand up so I can look at you. I want to make sure they're goin' in the right direction so your head don't look crooked," she says with a giggle. I giggle back with, "Come on, Mama! Do it! Do it!" I raise my arms up in the air. Her strong arms and hands swing me to my feet like she always does. Whirling me around to face her, I whisper, "Is my head crooked?" She cocks her head slightly sideways and grimaces, "Nope, not anymore. Just tell the kids to look at you like this." She cocks her head even more to the side then crosses her eyes.

"Mama!" She tickles me in my belly for a few seconds then squats down and gives me a hug, "I love my crooked headed little princess." Her body and scent engulf me as my nostrils fill with the mélange of fragrances from Mama's blouse: Virginia Slims, Secret deodorant, Crisco cooking oil and a hint of Bounce fabric softener.

She sits back down on the kitchen chair with me on her lap.

"Mama, what's a L.A. riot?"

"Why you wanna know that?" she asks with curious eyes. Looking down at her shirt, I start playing with a purple button and then shrug with a small whisper, "Because I want to know."

"Well, a bunch of Negroes actin' foolish. That's what the L.A. riots are. They're pissed off for the right reasons but now they

just actin' foolish. Burnin' up they own communities. Foolishness. 'Should be burnin' up some rich white folks' houses instead.'

"Well, Teresa said—well, she said—"

"That little white girl who pushed you today? What did that little girl say?"

"Well—"

"Look up at me when you talking, poopie bear. Always look people in the eyes when you are talking to them—even grown folk." I lift up my tightly braided head, and then nervously peer into Mama's captivating and serious eyes.

"She said her daddy says that Black people are crazy animals and that's why there's a L.A. riot—"

"Oh!? So those four white folk aren't crazy animals for beating the piss out of that poor man?" I shrug, not knowing who she's talking about.

"She said that we were animals Mama. I told her that she was stupid and then she pushed me." Securing me with one arm, she reaches across the table and grabs the phone book.

"What's her last name?"

"Bateman." Within several seconds, she has found the phone number. Finger on the page, squinting her eyes, she mumbles, "Let's give a J. L. Bateman a 'wake-up' call. Gimme the phone baby." I tentatively slide off of her lap, then amble towards the phone on the kitchen counter and bring it to her.

"You want to sit back on my lap?" I shake my head nervously and then sit across from her. Calmly, she lifts up the receiver and dials the number. As I hold my breath, I can faintly hear the phone ringing on the other end.

"Hello?" I barely hear on the other end. Mama perks up.

"Is this the J. L. Bateman residence..? OK, is this Mr. Bateman who has a little girl named Teresa? Because I want to make sure I got the right place ...?" I begin chewing the inside of my cheeks, worried what Teresa will do to me at school tomorrow.

"... For what? Because I got an important message for you and your daughter Mr. J. L. Bateman ..." she quickly takes the phone from her ear and stares directly at the receiver, "Fuck you and your

CHAPTER 1

Nazi ass daughter!” The phone slams down and I jump up, startled. My tiny body is numb. Do I cry or do I laugh?

Mama reaches into her shirt pocket and pulls out one Virginia Slims cigarette. Squinting my eyes disapprovingly, I vividly remember that yesterday she had vowed to quit because it worsened both our asthma and the cough she has had for the past year.

“It’s shit like this that makes it hard to quit.” Sighing and shaking her head, she lights it, stands up, and leaves our dimly lit apartment.

CHAPTER TWO

February 4, 2007
11:57 A.M.

Dear Diary,

I had the dream again. Same damn dream for three years now. Seems like that's all these pages are ever filled with. Though his face is blurry, I know it is him ... His body is nearly ghostly white, his teeth are sharp ivory razors, and several long sharp red-hot daggers have replaced his genitalia. This time, I am a toddler and crying—screaming at the top of my lungs, unable to move. As usual, everything in the nightmare is always fragmented. One moment Mama isn't there and the next moment she appears out of nowhere, trying to run away from him. But he always catches her and throws her down, violently onto the floor ... then I forget what happens. Every time I have awakened from that nightmare, the end of the dream fades away upon my reentry into the conscious world.

Earlier this morning, I woke up sobbing but with no memory of the end of the dream. Why can't I ever remember? As usual, my body remembers. Last time, I found myself rushing into our small bathroom to puke my brains out. For some strange reason, the thought of carrot cake cupcakes enters my mind and makes my stomach howl.

I spent the rest of the night in the bathroom, afraid to fall back to sleep, trying to calm my nerves. I know hot baths are a lot of money, but I really needed one. I'll work extra hours to pay for the hot water bill. I swear, my heart was still beating so fast, I could see the surface of the water trembling around me.

I know I shouldn't be thinking about this, but I think about it all the time. I saw the pink Gillette razor at the edge of the bathtub and contemplated doing more than just shaving my slim legs with it. I know I shouldn't be writing this.

These are the mental atrocities I have always kept to myself, along with other fragments of my identity that are archived in my most top secret war trenches; so deep that maybe I should be calling

them war abysses. They remain there because this conglomerate of psychological shrapnel scares the hell out of me. I have never told Mama about those nightmares about him. She did what she did to save us and didn't need me telling her that it has caused these nightmares. Mama has to think that I'm fine and has to believe that I think the space between her legs has never known pain.

My red Hello Kitty alarm clock buzzes at full volume. I hit the off-button so it doesn't wake up Mama. Turning, I see her face buried in the pillow, hands over her head, pressing her face deeper into the pillow. She had fallen asleep beside me last night, while we were talking. I must have been completely knocked out. I didn't even realize she hadn't gone to her own room.

"Sorry," I whisper to her. She mumbles something into the pillow, then removes her face, turns onto her back, yawns, scratches the scalp under her short afro, then pulls the sunburst orange and teal colored down comforter over her head.

Same drill every day, I think, rolling out of bed.

5:00 a.m. Another cold winter day. The bedroom is cold and biting, as usual. I look at my March 2007 Hello Kitty calendar image of the month. Well, spring is right around the corner. It won't be too cold for too much longer. Sitting at the edge of the bed, I rub my eyes, sniff, and try not to think about my shift at Quikstop. Maybe today will be different.

As usual I fight the urge to just say 'Screw it and screw all of them,' and roll back into bed. When was the last time I slept past five? I cannot remember. Sighing, I stand up. The cold air in the room envelopes me and I shiver.

Some people want long vacations in Europe, others, a brand new car. All I want is to wake up in the morning and not freeze to death. Rubbing my nose, I think, it's such a simple request. Not selfish ... And I know this ain't good for Mama—

I suddenly interrupt my own thoughts, not wanting to think about that 'unwanted house guest' so early in the morning. It will just make the day harder to get through. Several minutes later, I am

eating a bowl of hot oatmeal, mixed with fake blueberries. I am trying my damndest to start and finish my homework before my shift starts at seven.

My assignment is comical and offensive. Sniffing, I shake my head as I read the first page, *Social Theories of Poverty*. When I first enrolled into the class, I thought my decision had been a colossal mistake. During the first week, all we read was literature written by snobby white dudes with graduate degrees from all prestigiously white snobby institutions. As a freshman, I thought college would be different from the K-12 Eurocentric B.S.

“What do they know about poverty? About working your butt off for low pay? Theory! I am not a ‘theoretical’ person. I’m a real goddamn poor person,” I wanted to yell during our first class meeting. However, I didn’t have enough confidence to say how I felt because I wasn’t sure how Professor Rogards would take it, that first day of class. Would he be just like my teachers in elementary, middle, and high schools? My K-12 teachers never brought the color question into the literature we would read for English class; nor did my classmates raise the question, except for ‘Nigger Jim,’ who passed through our reading assignment. God, how I loathed every instance of that word within the pages of that timeless American classic. I’ll never forget the day we had our eighth grade class discussion about the book, when most of us had to read excerpts out loud. When it was my turn, and I had to say ‘nigger’ in front of Jim’s name, I replaced it with ‘brother.’ Ms. Rupert told me that I could not do that while the class giggled. She said to me, in the most condescending tone, *“You don’t have to say the n-word. I understand, but seriously, no one uses that word anymore anyway, so you shouldn’t let it bother you because it’s a thing of the past.”*

I turn the book over and there is the author’s picture. As expected, he is a middle-aged white man in a scholarly setting with a plethora of books in chestnut colored bookcases that we are to have assumed he has read. Reading aloud, “Shelby Wilson Stevens, born in Westport, Connecticut, graduated from Princeton University— of course—in 1952.” In a snobby snooty voice, I pretend to be Shelby, “Let me tell you what poverty is all about while I spend a year sabbatical in the Bahamas to write this pathetic excuse for

scholarship.” To an empty kitchen, I exclaim, “They should have me school them in this stuff. I got nineteen years of experience that their PhDs can’t even touch!”

“Savannah, shut up! Jesus, I’m trying to sleep. What are you making all that noise for?” I hear Mama interrupt from the bedroom. I fall off my soapbox and plunge back into the reality of our small kitchen. My ego bounces off the edge of the table then shatters onto the sage and blue-checkered linoleum floor.

“Sorry, Mama!”

Looking at the clock on the stove, I realize that I have roughly one hour and thirty minutes to speed read this B.S. perception of poverty. Sighing, I take one last gulp of my fake blueberry oatmeal and take the plunge into the mind of yet another egotistical intellectual masturbator with a penis and fair skin ...

Welcome to East Lebanon, Connecticut, my hometown.

Whenever Davis and I are driving back to East Lebanon, we are greeted by a wooden sign that states when the town was “settled.” Once in a while I propose to Davis that I should consider adjusting this historical inaccuracy and post my own greeting juxtaposed to it: “Taken from indigenous people and made into an African slave trade distribution point for free landowning white men.” Davis responds with a long sigh, rolls his eyes, then usually tells me to stop being bitter and to “stop living in the past.” Of course he says that. He and his family came from the original East Lebanon settlers, supposedly emigrating from an oppressive British Empire. He wouldn’t understand.

Almost nineteen years old and I’ve lived in East Lebanon for nearly eighteen of them. A small, once thriving agricultural town, East Lebanon is the home to about seven thousand people. Mama and I are among a few handfuls of folks that make up that .5% of “people of color” statistic in the town’s census. Though Mama was born in Georgia, Mama refuses to tell me why she decided to hop on the bus in Georgia, nearly nine months pregnant with me, and move her life to Connecticut. “When you’re old enough, I will tell you what you

need to know,” she used to always say. Even worse, whenever I would ask more about my father, she’d tell me, “You really don’t need to worry about that, ya hear?” What could I do in response other than sit in complacent anger as my peers spoke of their fathers?

For nearly two decades we’ve managed to remain here. Us two poor Black girls with Seminole and African blood running through our veins. Part of Mama’s enigmatic history had involved an ‘arrangement’ made with the son of the landlord’s nearly two decades ago. My imagination still sparkles with curiosity as I try to envision Mama, in 1989, arriving in an all white town with a tattered eleven-month-old baby girl in tow.

I don’t know why or what circumstances led to it, but from the time of my birth until the ‘arrangement,’ Mama tells me that she had ended up homeless in Hartford, Connecticut, by way of a one-way bus ticket from Georgia. When she arrived in Hartford, she says she was nearly nine months pregnant and gave birth to me two days later. The details are murky, but we apparently lived in various shelters and halfway homes for teenagers, after I was born.

When Mama was in the middle of finding another shelter for us, she met some old white guy named Scott. She had been sitting with me at a bus stop during a winter storm. We had been without shelter and enduring torrential rain and ice storms for several days. She never told me this, but I pretty much pieced together her story from eavesdropping in on conversations she has had, with Mr. and Mrs. Allen, off and on, throughout the years. Maybe I put the puzzle together wrong and my conclusions are wrong. However, at a very early age, I quickly grasped the idea of America being a land of many wolves, many sheep, and only a handful of shepherds that are usually outnumbered by the helplessness of the sheep and the merciless nature of the wolves. I no longer need her to give me the specific story. She was nineteen, hungry and cold with a baby who was becoming sick from exposure. Through my eavesdropping, I have concluded that Scott was the son of our first landlords.

She was alone.

She was cold and hungry with a sickly baby girl.

Every time I try not to think of this story, I cringe and collapse into a state of lamentation and tears. The nightmares I have

been having for the last three years tell me that Scott used her body as currency. Mama has told me that she got this apartment through a ‘special arrangement’: a secret between she and Scott. My mind screams against this image of Scott and Mama that I have burned into my head and recent nightmares from the past three years: It is 1989 and I am ten months old. I am in the living room of the apartment that will soon become my future home. I am crying in the living room. In the bedroom, behind closed doors, my mother’s spirit is finally broken, over and over again, as she makes untraceable payments to Scott with her body. At that defining moment that makes us who we are truly meant to be, my mind tells me that he chose to be a wolf over the shepherd, and rip apart the very vessel that gave birth to me—my sanctuary. I know that this is why she tells me that it is a secret. Who would want their daughter to know this about their mother?

No, she doesn’t have to tell me that this happened. He was a white man and it was 1989. What else could have happened? What else could that ‘special arrangement’ have entailed?

A year or two later, the landlords sold their properties and retired to Arizona.

In 2B, second floor, life’s wounds have transformed into ugly scars; loathsome scars that manifest into emotional breakdowns, ulcers, blind rages ... and Mama’s emphysema; the “unwanted house guest.”

2B, second floor has a distant view of the Quikstop store half a mile away, engulfed by sprawling green hills. It’s the apartment I’ve grown to call home, to love ... and to hate.