

Graduation Speech for 23 January 2024
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It was the armed cop standing over my father's life-left body
that was the start of my family's troubles.

It was the red stain soaking through the white sheet
and the blue Nike sneaker sticking out from underneath my neighborhood
that was my American flag.

It was the invisible scarlet line that outlined and undermined
our bodies and community
that was my home foreclosed before I even existed.

It was the condemned buildings I ran from while walking to school.

It was a 1,000 students in class and a teacher who couldn't remember my name.

My home was an extension of the dirty cardboard box I pretended was a fortress.

It was the scent of ackee and saltfish and fried dumplings
and the vibration of reggae music staggering into my bedroom window
on a Saturday morning Summer breeze.

It was every family on our street getting dressed on Easter Sunday
when I couldn't even find my church shoes.

It was always landlords with their hands out
and Jehovah witnesses with their handouts
and pastors getting ten percent of whatever we didn't have
that kept us tithed to food stamps.

It was the days when mommy was late for her second job
and I had to be late for my first day of school.

It was her cooking dinner for every body
then me noticing she didn't even have a spoon.

I was the last of my siblings to be born into my family,
the one they called the “washbelly” because I rinsed out her womb.

Before I could even blink

It was the twisted metal barbed wire spiraling through a concrete eternity
that was my white picket fence around the American dream
that became sleepless nights reading and writing under low prison cell lights.

But it was an inherited gratitude for knowledge, my upbringing,
and love for family and community that made me sign up for college.

It was the lingering sounds of words spoken by my Tufts Professors and mentors
that showed me a space where my history could be a better part of our future .

That was the chance for my ink to form the many lines of my papers,

spelling out what was once before impossible.

I befriended the books and scripts and tomes

and made sure the ink and paper would never be alone.

A clean rag, mop bucket, and dirty broom

I swirled around prison classroom floors, desks, and whiteboards.

I had been up before sunrise and the sun watched me read and write

as it settled into the night sky.

It was on the coldest winter nights, my mind in books,

when I felt the heat of my ancestors who died without learning to read or write.

I am the son of a strong woman who taught me there's no such thing as probably -
you do it or you don't.

I am the son of relentless efforts of abolitionists who trusted in humanity
that pushed open the heavy doors of ignorance
pointing me towards new opportunities.

I had to become my own poetry and through all I have read and learned,
my rhyme scheme was hard to change.

It was A C A B in poverty when our food lines became stanzas
from the unreasonable demands being made of us.

It was archaic laws that had to be changed

and the releasing of chains that have been jingling since slavery

It is this change that gave us back our youth in the form of redemption.

It is the idea that civic engagement includes everyone

From skyscrapers to pavement without excuses or exemptions.

Everything I ever experienced has shaped my life in some way

and everything I can remember

has shaped the person I am still discovering every day.

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