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Foreword

Ariana Benson

author of *Black Pastoral*, winner of the Cave Canem Poetry Prize

*My Mama moved among the days
like a dreamwalker in a field:*

...

*she got us almost through the high grass
then seemed like she turned around and ran
right back in
right back on in*

—LUCILLE CLIFTON

As a collection of poems born of Black motherhood—the observation of it, the being daughtered by it, the becoming into it, the loss of it—*Nursery Rhymes in Black* is the hearty language child of so many cultural histories. It tends to the idiosyncratic truths lived by author Latorial Faison and her grandmother who raised her, a grand figure captured so vividly, so tenderly that the poem-character of her feels almost as familiar as she does unknowable; close enough for readers to watch the sweat forming like diamonds in the caves of her furrowed-over-stove brow, but with just enough of her out of frame, her fullness visible only to those who knew her in her time, in her world, as in the opening poem:

*She was a goodnight prayer, a moon that shined down through
my bedroom window. She was the alphabet, a Sunday School
verse, a third Sunday gospel song to rehearse, a mostly misun-
derstood exchange of power, responsibility & command.*

If her Mama is a moon, Faison hangs her so fully in the sky of these poems, not shying away from some of her less beautiful beliefs, the craters in her well-worn surface. She casts lush images like so many twinkling stars whose luminance only emphasizes this matriarchal splendor, an imposing singularity in the black of night. Admittedly, many of the constellations conjured in her background

are ones I recognize from my own childhood universe: the issues of the *Virginian Pilot* stacked on my grandmother's kitchen table, the shady 7-11 gas stations and knowing which ones were safest to fill up, Hancock Peanuts, boiled road-trip snack perfection. This collection rests upon poems of place, poems of a world whose inherent, architectural Blackness thrives in spite of, poems that guide readers (as did the stars the wise men) to their own promised land.

Much of the promise of *Nursery Rhymes in Black* lies in the way this collection reveals generational *knowing*; this is fitting, given that its titular mode of storytelling is one that so often uses rhythmic melody to blur an undercurrent of darker histories and meanings. If you already know the truths bound up in this book, the poems will vividly reanimate them. If you don't, read on to see them painstakingly unveiled. To begin to know what a Southern Black mother goes through, what she might be looking for at the bottom of a crystal tumbler or at the end of a verse. Know what it's like to "love / a white child to death" and "nurse a malnourished / Black one back to good / health with her poor, / dark, gifted self." Know what kind of *worst*s she prepares for, and where she keeps her checkbook for when they inevitably arrive. Know what it means to be a Black mother raised by a Black mother, and not know how to make sense of a world where this is no longer true.

In her *Lose Your Mother*, Black feminist scholar and cultural historian Saidiya Hartman writes: "Loss remakes you. Return is as much about the world to which you no longer belong as it is about the one in which you have yet to make a home." To lose your mother, then, is to have a part of you leave with her, and have the rest returned to a world in which you no longer belong. In poems like "A Whole Town's Eyes" and "How to Bury Your Mama" (excerpted below), the surreality of this grief lodges itself in the creases of everyday life, warping mundane ephemera into piercing reminders of absence:

You look at all the people, all the pictures, all the things she wore
& touched & you touch them, drape them all over you in hopes
of feeling the warmth of her sun again. She is absolutely every-

where: in old sweaters, hairbrushes, pillow shams & in a black leather Sunday School change purse filled with bobby pins.

You still see her. Even in all the faces that are not hers, you see her trying to survive, trying to breathe, trying to find words, spirituals & hugs, motherless children, and God in this medium between Courtland & glory; you want to go with her.

...

In the days, months & years ahead, you hold on to every word she said like it was gospel because she was the only truth you ever knew; you know that now. You do not agree with death; you do not understand God.

By the time we reach “When We Fall on Our Knees,” Faison’s speaker has herself joined the choral *we* of Black motherhood and has thus gained new knowledges, new losses to fear those of her own children, of so many Black children this world would make motherless. It’s enough to make anyone question God, the life laid out on these pages, enough to make anyone turn to Him for comfort anyway. The poems in this collection, then, forge ahead in the wake of this non-understanding, keeping close the memory-mementos of childhood life in Courtland—of lifelong holiday traditions and corner store excursions and whispered prayers—the speaker’s mother in the background for all of it, her spirit a backdrop like the Black heavens against which the words here glow and burn.

At the same time, these poems, through Faison’s dedicated framing and firm hand, sing with a choral awareness—knowing they are joined by many other voices in the harmony of Southern Black hymn-histories (in “Mama Sang the Blues”).

Like whippoorwills, like Mama, and like every strong Black woman who came before me, *I come to this fountain . . . rich and sweet*. They come whistling. She comes singing. I come believing that we come to raise the dead.

These poems, in their pastel fascinators and satin-sheen stockings, turn to their neighbors in the literary pews (the resonant poems of writers like Lucille Clifton and Wanda Coleman spring first to mind), and ask *how you doin' sister so-and-so*, and in response, say *I'm blessed to see another morning*. They embody the role of church mother—a motherhood not designated by biology, but rather elder status and commitment to care of the youth, lest they fall to the wayside of this wretched world. They offer both a harsh word and a soft purse mint, sternness as guidance, sweetness as salve.

Anyone who's been to the church that Faison's mother so loved, the church that I grew up in, knows little more rouses a Sunday morning congregation like a good solo, brash and belted in a tone too singular to ever fully blend with her home section. Knows how the *let Him use yous* and the *take ya time*, *nows* shower down as the vocalist humbly reveals herself from the crowd of robed voices, expression as stoic as one who knows she's about to blow the roof off the sanctuary can stand to be. Knows the way the singer approaches the microphone, how she adjusts the stand and unfurls the cord a few lengths at her feet, is all part of the ritual of the performance. *Nursery Rhymes in Black* is a collection that understands so much of Blackness is this: a beautiful performance, one where the audience plays as key a role as any of those on the stage or at the pulpit. It's an inverted sort of collective theater in which the characters, after a long, hard week of playing the roles they must out in the white world, line the pews as audience and let their true selves shout and shine.

Giving Mama the solo means Faison has cast herself, in this collection, as choir director, a slightly less glamorous role on its face, but one without which there would be no song at all. I invite you reader, as you make your way through this Black lyric hymnal, to keep an eye on Faison's instructive poetic hands. How their movement staccatos when emphasis is needed. How a short poem ends abruptly with the quick swoop of a circled fist, leaving bated breath between its end and the next notes, ushered in with the come-hither of an astonishing first line, the kind that demands a new ear, a fresh

eye. As you let the rhythms and cries of bellowing standouts “I’m So Courtland,” “Mama Home?,” “Important Papers,” and “These Feet” (to name only a few of my personal favorites) use you, make of you a swaying devotee, throw yourself, reader, at the altar of these poems, the raw power of the stories within—and find yourself made anew, made whole again, after their final amen.

ARIANA BENSON is a Southern Black ecopoet born in Norfolk, Virginia, whose debut poetry collection, *Black Pastoral* (University of Georgia Press, 2023), won the 2022 Cave Canem Poetry Prize, the 2024 Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize from the Academy of American Poets, and the Kate Tufts Discovery Award, and was a finalist for the National Books Critics Circle Leonard Prize and the Library of Virginia Prize in Poetry. Benson is a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, a Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Fellowship, and awards from The Poetry Foundation, Furious Flower, the Oak Spring Garden Foundation, the Porter House Review, and the 2021 Graybeal-Gowen Prize for Virginia Poets. Her poems and essays have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *The Yale Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Poetry Magazine*, *Poem-a-day*, and elsewhere. Benson is a proud alumna of Spelman College, where she facilitates creative writing and storytelling workshops for HBCU students.