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Head Off & Split

By Nikky Finney

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Terrance Hayes writes:

I can remember first hearing Nikky Finney's "The Condoleezza Suite" in 2006 at a reading for the Cave Canem Tenth Anniversary Reunion. As she read a poem in the voice of Condoleezza Rice's Ferragamo shoes, a kind of Sunday swoon echoed through the auditorium. The poem, now among her most celebrated, is at a glance, an indictment of Rice, but the first time I heard it and later when I read it, I was drawn to Finney's depiction of Rice's humanity:

No other Black girl
In Bombingham, with the sound of music emerald
set so deep in her heart, has ever been told over
Sunday dinner, while the gravy is still passing through
the air, *King is crazy*.

As "The Condoleezza Suite" conjures scenes of Rice when four girls were murdered in the 1963 Birmingham Alabama Church bombing, Rice exercising at the Watergate Hotel, and Rice shopping for shoes during Hurricane Katrina, Finney's audacious imagination is in full display. She is a poet of contemplation and grace, but one who very possibly wears a switchblade around her neck. It is this combination of fierce scrutiny and fierce empathy that fortifies her long gaze into/through history.

"We begin with history," Finney says at the opening of her National Book Award acceptance speech. The line is both literal and figurative; it casts multiple degrees of *forthrightness* (sometimes a word has to be tailor-made). It suggests we begin attached to history: the umbilical cord connecting the child to everything the mother has encountered. It suggests we begin not with the Self, but with all that precedes the Self.

Finney's wondrous acceptance speech is an acknowledgement to being alive while being inextricably bound to the past. It is now appropriately included in the new edition of *Head Off & Split*. Like the speech, the book is a manifold act of acknowledgement. "If my name is ever called out, I promised my girl-poet self, so too would I call out theirs." The history we begin with is rooted in acknowledgement, in witness, and, as Finney shows us, in collaboration. Her poems are duets and choruses. We hear the italicized voices of Rosa Parks, Mayree Monroe, Robert F. Williams—even the titles are peopled acknowledgements: "Shaker: Wilma Rudolph Appears While Riding the Althea Gibson Highway Home," "Dancing with Strom," "Alice Butler," "The Condoleezza Suite." The poems braid the immediacy of the weather channel, the NBC Nightly News, *Discover Magazine*, politics, and catastrophes to the enduring struggle against forces "devoted to quelling freedom and insurgency, imagination, all hope." In short, all that is breathtaking in this poet's acceptance speech is breathtaking in her poems.

In fact, the wide praise for the speech left me wondering which mattered more: the poet or the poems, the maker or what the maker makes? An emphasis on the poem as a pure work of art threatens to strip it of its contemporary concerns in the name of something like "timeless beauty." An emphasis on the charismatic poet threatens to make the poem something fleeting, topical. My question is how does a poet make poetry that is unobstructed by poetry? What does Jack Gilbert say in "Measuring the Tyger": "Newness strutting around as if it were significant. / Irony, neatness and rhyme pretending to be poetry." Sometimes the poet has to break the shiny frame of artifice to name names, to praise, indict, elegize—to speak, as Gilbert says in the end of his poem, "to the magnitude of pain, of being that much alive." Without Lucille Clifton, without Adrienne Rich, Jack Gilbert and Nikky Finney are the only other poets I can think of working as

intensely at being alive. When Finney writes in her collection's title poem: "my throat separates from the rest of me I am fully / awake," she seems to echo Gilbert. It suggests when the song is free of the body, the singer is conscious. How does a poet make a poem that is unobstructed by poetry? In the final poem of *Head Off & Split*, "Instruction, Final: To Brown Poets from Black Girl with Silver Leica," Finney tells us: "The juice is not made in the vats but in the vineyard." The vineyard is a place of natural order and disorder, of struggle. The vat is part of the process but not at the root of the work. The vat enables refinement, but to be a true poet—to unearth the juice of a true poem—you must "keep yourself rooted in the sun, rain, and darkly camphored air."



Terrance Hayes is the author of *Lighthouse* (Penguin 2010), winner of the 2010 National Book Award and finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and Hurston Wright award. His other poetry books are *Wind in a Box*, *Muscular Music*, and *Hip Logic*. Other honors include a Whiting Writers Award, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, a United States Artist Zell Fellowship, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He is a professor of creative writing at Carnegie Mellon University and lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.