

The National Book Awards  
Acceptance Speech for Poetry  
November 16, 2011  
Cipriani's, New York, New York

One: We begin with history. The Slave Codes of SC, 1739:

*a fine of one hundred dollars and six months in prison will be imposed for anyone found teaching a slave to read, or write, and death is the penalty for circulating any incendiary literature.*

The ones who longed to read and write, but were forbidden, who lost hands and feet, were killed, by laws written by men who believed they owned other men. Their words devoted to quelling freedom and insurgency, imagination, all hope; what about the possibility of one day making a poem? The king's mouth and the queen's tongue arranged, perfectly, on the most beautiful paper, sealed with wax and palmetto tree sap, determined to control what can never be controlled: the will of the human heart to speak its own mind.

Tonight, these forbidden ones move all around the room as they please. They sit at whatever table they want. They wear camel-colored field hats and tomato- red kerchiefs. They are bold in their Sunday-go-to-meeting best. Their cotton croker-sack shirts are black washpot clean and irreverently not tucked in. Some have even come in white Victorian collars and bustiers. Some have just climbed out of the cold wet Atlantic, just to be here. We shiver together.

If my name is ever called out, I promised my girl-poet self, so too would I call out theirs.

Two:

Parneshia Jones (Acquisitions Editor), Marianne Jankowski (Art Director), and Northwestern University Press, this moment has everything to do with how seriously, how gorgeously, you do what you do.

A.J. Verdelle, editor-partner in this language life, you taught me that repetition is holy, Courage is a daughter's name, and two is stronger than one.

Papa, chief opponent of the death penalty in South Carolina for 50 years, 57 years married to the same Newberry girl, when I was a girl you bought every encyclopedia, dictionary, and Black history tome, that ever knocked on our Oakland Avenue door.

Mama, dear mama, Newberry girl, 57 years married to the same Smithfield boy, you made Christmas, Thanksgiving, and birthdays out of foil, lace, cardboard, and paper maché, insisting beauty into our deeply segregated southern days.

Adrienne Rich, Yusef Komunyakaa, Carl Philips, and Bruce Smith, simply to be in your Finalist Company is to brightly burn.

National Book Foundation and 2011 National Book Award judges for poetry, there were special, and subversive, high school English teachers who would read and announce the highly anticipated annual report, from the National Book Foundation; the names of the winners stowed way down deep in some dusty corner of our tiny southern newspaper.

Dr. Gloria Wade Gayles, great and best teacher, you asked me on a Friday, 4 o'clock, 1977, I was 19 and sitting on a Talladega College wall dreaming about

the only life I ever wanted, that of a poet. “Miss Finney,” you said, “do you really have time to sit there, have you finished reading every book in the library?”

Dr. Katie Cannon, what I heard you say once still haunts every poem I make, “Black People were the only people in the United States ever explicitly forbidden to become literate.”

I am now, officially, speechless.

Nikky Finney