

GRANDMA'S GREENS

on the forgotten side
of a babylon
is where grandma's garden hung
shadowed by silo mountains
in earshot of smoky iron rivers
we left the asphalt
to spend the growing season
with her
our young knees
bent into turned earth
we built foliage cities
of collard, mustard, and turnip
by tossing embryos
in ancient gridded rows
as grandma chanted incantations
and bushy jade heads
sprung from the dirt
to swallow sun

the grandbabies' jobs were
to harness aluminum clouds
to precipitate on the leaf palaces
to mine weeds with bent tridents
to defend the veiny structures
from critters
but once the plants got waist high
grandma would tell us
to decapitate them all
to the altar of kinfolk

and on the rim of dusk
in a screened-porch temple
over a carpet of newspaper
we pick their sturdy flesh clean
from spindly stalks
squash any bugs
then have her anoint our offerings
with her thorough inspection
before she marches
every emerald bushel
into her cauldron
of rolling aromatics,
roots and spices,
the greens scream a bit
hitting the boiling water
their leathery texture
softens as they drown

sending out unseen signals
to relatives all the way in newburg
down to alabama, houston
even my home blocks away
the hairs on our necks stand on end
when another pot brews
and sooner or later we find ourselves
around a too-small table
in a too-small house
and everyone's just fine
we can't resist the polarity
of those steaming plates
of grandma's hocus pocus

that she passes like an heirloom
across several generations

even after her matriarchal reign
grandbabies and their babies
will practice the high art
of potioning greens
and conjuring family

BARBER COLLEGE

let me cut them sticker bushes, boy
said great aunt eva
short, sturdy, and smocked
in her own barber shop
as she placed me in a booster seat

and, boy, give me some shugah, too
her whiskered lips pecked
at my toddler cheeks and then
she began excavating
my head I cried

she'd point at
the many photographs
proliferating across the walls
of a broad man who sort of
looked like my daddy

see, boy, he's your cousin
see, boy, he's the champ
of the whole world

I'd look at daddy
and he'd shrug it off
then I would whine to leave

one day daddy up and said
your aunt eva never gives
the cut I want

so he brought home
a wahl's clipper set
to d.i.y. my head
at the dim kitchen table
no pictures on the wall
of anyone here
and with no training
no instruction
daddy dove in

I heard
a lumpish snort
before I felt
the hot vibrating razor
glance off my skull
before I saw
a black cloud of my hair
sink into my lap
then *oops, sorry!*

next day momma sanctioned
daddy and me on an emergency
sabbath morning haircut
to stave off church embarrassment
we went to the 'big a' strip mall
entered a wood-paneled shrine
to u of l cardinal basketball
and also to that man
aunt eva called champ

every square inch of wall
had either a red bird
or him, satin-shorted and shirtless
with shimmering sepia skin
while on tv played
a vhs tape of this poetic warrior
boxing through reporters
and pundits and peers
his whole career on infinite loop

when I got seated
the barber asked me loud enough
for the whole shop to hear
*you know that you and your daddy
are blood with the greatest?*
he pointed at the tv
I shrugged it off like I was taught to
did your daddy not tell you about him?

I shrugged again, daddy looked away
the barber shook his head and said
we gonna fix that
then this blade wielding homer
proceeded to spin an epic tale

*Cassius descended from Titans out of the Hades part
of Louisville, like you and me and all of us*

*said to have Hephaestus hammer fist, to be as swift
as Hermes especially in the lip, and prettier than Helen*

*kidnapped at an early age and trained in Troy
by a pantheon of mere men rich off their daddy's inheritance*

*their new Achilles whose heel was having an IQ so low,
by their design, he could avoid Vietnam*

*and if he stayed in line, he'd be their next
Mr. Bojangles-Jack Johnson*

*but Cassius wasn't their Atlas for long
though he was a brown Delphi*

*predicting then delivering Liston to the mat
and putting his benefactors into a cash coma*

*and as they slept, post-fight, Clay's Trojan-horse chest
opened and Muhammad Ali coolly strolled out*

*a soon-to-be black demigod tongue-launched
fiery barbs at the oppressors' press*

*torching contracts, introducing black folks to self-love
especially after that cabal went after that heel of his ...*

*but that's another odyssey
for your next cut, young one*

there's almost a standing ovation
and I yearn to stay in the chair
and hear more from this sage
but daddy is already paying and he interjects,
*all he did was trade one master for another
that shows how weak-minded he was
changing the family name and all*

everyone gets quiet
the barber curls his lips in disbelief
and says, *you just jealous
'cause you still got that clay money
which ain't shit compared to that ali money*
and the shop erupts in laughter and jeers
at my daddy who sort of smiles
gives an almost defeated nod
then tips the man as we slink out the door