



I THOUGHT OF THAT, BY CARLOS VEGA, COURTESY OF JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

# What Hangs on Trees

*Legacy and memory in the southern landscape*

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I AM SIMULTANEOUSLY enchanted and haunted by trees.

As a child, I was a tomboyish tree-climbing tree lover—a day-dreamer held in mahogany arms. If I went missing, my family knew where to find me: perched on a branch, peering up into the sky or speculating about the world below. Then, I did not know the word *sacred*, but I sensed the meaning, especially sheltered from the world by a dome of emerald leaves. It was the one place where I felt the most whole. I experienced an inexplicable kinship with trees, which is probably why I developed an insatiable curiosity to learn their names: maple, pine, birch, willow . . . Live oaks were my trees of choice.

At that time, there was no way for me to grasp the shadow side, to investigate the tangled depths of my psyche in regard to trees, especially those gnarled live oaks. My dual consciousness was related to the land, especially land below the Mason-Dixon line. But I didn't realize just how severe the dichotomy was until graduate school, when I was asked to write a pastoral poem, a poem that regales the bucolic aspects of nature. When I attempted to write the poem, I hit a wall, a psychological and historical one. It wasn't until my last semester, when I studied a poem from Lucille Clifton's book *Mercy* that I began to understand why the pastoral poem was causing me so much deep-seated angst. Clifton's untitled poem begins:

*surely I am able to write poems  
celebrating grass*

She ends:

*but whenever i begin  
"the trees wave their knotted branches  
and . . ." why  
is there under that poem always  
an other poem?*

A master of compression, in eleven terse lines Lucille Clifton evokes the horror of the Middle Passage and of lynching. She does so without ever mentioning these words, preferring to let her images provoke. The speaker in the poem grapples, too, with the pursuit of writing the pastoral poem. Clifton subverts the canon and the mainstream as she looks through the eyes of the oppressed, which includes herself.

I readily understood her struggle as my own. After studying her poem, I felt liberated personally and poetically, emboldened to embrace and investigate how my gaze and walk have been shaped by America's tainted history. I started to use the term *antipastoral* to name the inability to focus one's gaze solely on the positive attributes of nature due to the systemic and routine wounding of a people in a particular place. In my antipastoral poem "Say Carolina," I address my love-hate relationship with my home state:

## Say Carolina

*For My Palmetto State  
After Rita Dove*

Nothin finer than a tea drunk gurl  
raised on peaches sugah honey chile & y'all  
Nothin finer than her palmetto & crescent moonshine  
pinched and dangling on each ear  
Nothin finer than her sass  
her sweet potato thick waist  
spreading from Low Country to Upstate  
bible belt cinched and clinched  
sportin 47 patches that work  
a rice cotton & tobacco shimmy  
from sun up to sundown

Carolina's hot  
& cotton's supposed to let you breathe  
but under her honeysuckle & jasmine print skirt  
all you feel is the burn of 9000 ebony fires  
& Denmark Vesey leading the charge  
whispering in quilt-stitch code  
for a stolen people to rise up  
sharpen their dreams  
and fly

Carolina's a gumbo  
sweet grass grace mixed with old money  
Look down her cobblestone roads  
laced with Spanish moss You feel the worlds  
between the worlds Rainbow row colors  
blending with auction block songs Part the veils  
but don't get too close to her port waters  
even if you know how to swim cause

Carolina's deep  
She's a complicated Lady  
look beyond the magnolias and mint juleps  
she all plantation upfront & Middle Passage baggage behind  
She's had a hard time carrying the weight  
but Carolina don't care cause she the bomb  
all muskets & cannons when she lifts her skirt  
Shoot Carolina will blow your mind  
with the twisted & strange fruit  
she both bears & wears  
Say it again Carolina don't care  
She done acquired the taste,  
you can tell how she walks & talks  
she likes how it hangs

MY ANCESTORS entered America through the Port of Charleston both chained and shackled, as did forty thousand other slaves. Over the generations, my family's poverty-ridden journey took them from slaves and sharecroppers up into America's working middle class. Both of my parents, Johnny and Jeanette Redmond, were born in 1936 and raised under the harsh wings of South Carolina's Jim Crow. They came from sharecropping families, and their relationship with the land was strained at best.

My father joined the air force at age eighteen to escape the land, poverty, and racism. His exact words were, "I needed to leave the South because if one more person called me *boy*, I would kill them." My mom said, "When I left the South, I brushed the dust off my shoulders."

My parents' military trek and their stance on the South left impressions on me that I am still discovering. They were not all negative: I learned to mix and mingle with people of all faiths, creeds, races, and religions. But I knew little about my extended family and roots in South Carolina.

I was twelve when we returned to South Carolina in the mid-'70s. Having moved from Aviano, Italy, I suffered extreme culture shock. It felt as if the civil rights movement had never happened. The air force bases that I had grown up on were not devoid of racism, but they were light-years ahead of civilian society, especially in Piedmont, South Carolina. My re-entry to the South made me a curious southerner, an insider-outsider, which drove me to ask questions about race and how it played out in school, church, and other social venues.

Although the last recorded lynching in South Carolina—that of Willie Earle—took place in 1947, it still felt close to the surface. Earle, a black man, was being detained in Greenville, South Carolina, having been accused of the stabbing and robbery of a white cabdriver. Twenty-six white men dragged Willie Earle from jail and took him to Saluda Dam near Bramlett Road. Though he professed innocence, he was silenced with a shot to the head. All twenty-six men were found not guilty; no blacks were allowed to serve on the jury. The ramifications of this unjust history still echo in South Carolina and throughout the South. In "Nature Lesson" I conflate Willie Earle's lynching with the many that came before, often in the form of hangings:

## Nature Lesson

1947.  
At age eleven  
my mama learned  
how a rope turns  
into more than a rope  
looped around a branch  
where a tree becomes  
more than a tree  
where memory twists  
around more than the mind  
like Willie Earle's life  
and my mama's young heart  
In Greenville, South Carolina  
mama sees how memory hangs  
on  
each  
and  
every  
tree

I surmise my parents dealt with these heinous acts by disassociating in order to cope. By enlisting, my father relocated us geographically and emotionally—a conscious act that created distance from his and my mother’s childhood pain. Eighteen years of living in the South had impacted their psyches. They averted their gazes literally and metaphorically and shut their mouths about what they had witnessed growing up.

My parents silenced themselves in their need to move on and forget. They also had a strong desire and sense of duty to shield their children from the hate they had experienced. Yet that self-silencing helped to create an incredible weight and an unanswerable void in me. Their youngest daughter, I sensed and shouldered their unvoiced pain.

When I returned to creating a pastoral poem, it always came back to this pain, which was both personal and part of the greater, collective African-American plight. In *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, the first widely acclaimed book to wholly examine the long-lasting impact of slavery on its heirs, Dr. Joy Degruy argues that America has yet to fully acknowledge this generational legacy. In a 2006 interview, Degruy asserts, “I don’t believe in making people feel ‘guilty.’ We have to recognize that remnants of racist oppression continue to impact people in this country.”

The legacy of lynching is woven into the fabric of America. Used as a tool of fear and a widespread form of control after blacks gained freedom from slavery, it has cast its long shadow across the country. Trees, though benign in themselves, stand at the center of this history, and they bear that imprint.

IN THE MID-’70S, my brother Willie and his white friend were out late at night driving around in our neighborhood, doing what teenage boys do. They ran into a KKK member burning a cross and confronted him. Yelled, “Hey, what are you doing?” The next day, my brother relayed the story to our family; a pre-teen, I just sat and listened. We went on with our lives as if nothing had happened, but I was gripped with this image, surreal as it was to me. It was the mid-’70s after all. On my way to school the next morning, I saw the cross smoldering at the entrance of our subdivision. The Klan member had returned and completed his mission. This is where I am from.

I carry this image in my psyche. My memory is long. Our memory is long.

My mother, when sending us to the store to buy mundane items such as bread, ketchup, and crackers, often schooled us to obtain a receipt and a bag for the purchase—to prove that we had not stolen the merchandise. Her warning: “I’ve seen black people hung for less than that.” My mother was not being cruel; she was actually doing the opposite, trying to keep her children

safe in an unsafe world. We were warned about water and the woods in much the same way.

Although as a modern woman I walk in more worlds than my parents have walked, and have been afforded opportunities my parents were not, I have still passed down some of their defense codes to my own daughters, wittingly and unwittingly:

## We Not Care-free

Amber & Celeste daughters  
of earth & sky, Do not apologize

for why you don’t dig nature  
all the time. You don’t have

to answer for the code unleashed  
in your bones: the unnatural tilt of trees

the reflections of a boy named Emmett,  
held wide-eyed underwater. You do

not have to jump off cliffs  
into swimming holes to hold

God’s green hand. You’ve been schooled:  
all around history’s ground is sinking sand.

Of course, I would love to have been that nine-year-old girl with an idyllic childhood without knowing the shadow side of trees, but the knowing is held somewhere in my cellular DNA, and in that of my children, too.

I rarely ask my mom about the cruelty she and her family encountered as she was growing up, because the pain is palpable. If I want to know about a painful part of her past, I have to talk to her indirectly; only then will she tell me a story. Instead of asking her about lynching, I asked if she was allowed to play outside as a child. She said, “Sure, we were free to wander and play.” Then that faraway look came into her eyes, as if she were staring into another world. “We played outside as children, and when an adult was dragged out of their home and hung, the adults tried to keep that out of our ears.” I stopped my line of questions there.

What I know is that my mother tried to shield her children from pain in much the same way her parents tried to protect her. But those hangings still found their way into my world; they filled my ears, eyes, and heart. Lynching, dragging, and drowning blacks is a historical reality. This reality is in the land, whenever I gaze deep enough.

I DID NOT UNDERSTAND just how haunted I was until I visited Charleston, South Carolina, in 1993, on vacation with my then husband. It was more than a vacation: it was an awakening. The carriage ride we took on the cobblestone roads of Charleston transported me to a time when the slave market and auction block were still in use. The live oaks laced with Spanish moss loomed large and seemed to speak of the memories that hung on their limbs. These ancient trees, along with the Atlantic waters, began to tell me the story of the Middle Passage.

It was at this port of entry that my ancestors embarked on a life of servitude. I began to quake with awareness. The Atlantic holds the story of my lineage, fragmented by the Middle Passage. Reckoning with the land and all that it holds means peering into the shadow side. The shadow side permeates everything I do and write. It is in something as simple as being referred to as a southerner.

In her book *Legba's Crossing: Narratology in the African Atlantic*, Heather Russell unpacks the meaning of a dance created by slaves—the limbo, in which one bends one's back in order to shimmy underneath a rope or stick. This contortion is metaphor, a representation of the physical and mental conditions of slaves held in the hull of the ship during the Middle Passage.

Slaves and descendants of slaves had to be creative and resourceful in order to survive treacherous circumstances. These qualities are embedded in our legacy of dance and song, in spirituals and ring shouts. Such art forms were expressions of the soul, meant to empower the participants to transcend the daily grind of slavery, punishment, and unbearable labor. As a writer, I dance the limbo. I am negotiating that “tight space.”

Russell calls those who live in the mainstream world but who have been brought up in the African-American community “the placeless.” A foot in each world, they have the burden and the privilege of translating our heritage, language, and understanding to the dominant culture. Former poet laureate Rita Dove calls it the “burden of explanation.”

AS AN ADULT, I am no longer a climber of trees, but I am still a tree lover. I like to linger around them. I especially love redwoods,

baobabs, and the banyans that twist and turn. My love is complicated: Their trunks suggest a contorted human body. I see black-and-white photos of black men lynched. I think of the nooses around necks; I walk every day with this sense of annihilation. Their silenced voices speak to me.

Our genealogies are represented through trees, the family tree, and yet I stand in the arms of my family tree unable to trace it whole because of what was done out of greed and evil. I can't walk on the land and dismiss what happened on this ground I call home. It will never disappear from the landscape. Therefore I'm haunted, but still searching to resolve the phantom pangs of my lineage, an urge that always compels me back to the base of the tree, to the beginning—to stand on the land and see and hear what the trees' memory reveals.

I can't avert my gaze from the shadow that the lynching tree casts. Trees carry an intolerable weight. Poetry is how I try to hold, carry, and tend to the load, to embrace both the darkness and the light; it is how I grapple with the unbearable. The memory that hangs on trees hangs on me: I write to mend.

## Genealogy

*Mus tek cyear a de root fa heal de tree.*  
—Gullah proverb

I can only beget  
so much—wrestling

with limb break  
and early leaf fall.

So, I bend my body  
in both work

& prayer. Pull  
& dig stories up

by the root.  
Plunk them down,

water & turn  
green verse

walking between  
the worlds.

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