

# FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

## ROBERT HAYDEN

### *Those Winter Sundays*

Sundays too my father got up early  
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,  
then with cracked hands that ached  
from labor in the weekday weather made  
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.  
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,  
and slowly I would rise and dress,  
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,  
who had driven out the cold  
and polished my good shoes as well.  
What did I know, what did I know  
of love's austere and lonely offices?

# NIKKI GIOVANNI

## *Nikki-Rosa*

childhood remembrances are always a drag  
if you're Black  
you always remember things like living in Woodlawn  
with no inside toilet  
and if you become famous or something  
they never talk about how happy you were to have  
your mother  
all to yourself and  
how good the water felt when you got your bath  
from one of those  
big tubs that folk in Chicago barbecue in  
and somehow when you talk about home  
it never gets across how much you  
understood their feelings  
as the whole family attended meetings about Hollydale  
and even though you remember  
your biographers never understand  
your father's pain as he sells his stock  
and another dream goes  
And though you're poor it isn't poverty that  
concerns you  
and though they fought a lot  
it isn't your father's drinking that makes any difference  
but only that everybody is together and you  
and your sister have happy birthdays and very good  
Christmases  
and I really hope no white person ever has cause  
to write about me  
because they never understand  
Black love is Black wealth and they'll  
probably talk about my hard childhood  
and never understand that  
all the while I was quite happy

## JAMILA WOODS

### *Ode to Herb Kent*

Your voice crawls across the dashboard of Grandma's Dodge Dynasty on the way home from Lilydale First Baptist. You sing a cocktail of static and bass. Sound like you dressed to the nines: cowboy hat, fur coat & alligator boots. Sound like you lotion every tooth. You a walking discography, South Side griot, keeper of crackle & dust in the grooves. You fell in love with a handmade box of wires at 16 and been behind the booth ever since. From WBEZ to V103, you be the Coolest Gent, King of the Dusties. Your voice wafts down from the ceiling at the Hair Lab. You supply the beat for Kym to tap her comb to. Her brown fingers paint my scalp with white grease to the tunes of Al & Barry & Luther. Your voice: an inside-out yawn, the sizzle of hot iron on fresh perm, the song inside the blackest seashell washed up on a sidewalk in Bronzeville. You soundtrack the church picnic, trunk party, Cynthia's 50th birthday bash, the car ride to school, choir, Checkers. Your voice stretch across our eardrums like Daddy asleep on the couch. Sound like Grandma's sweet potato pie, sound like the cigarettes she hide in her purse for rough days. You showed us what our mommas' mommas must've moved to. When the West Side rioted the day MLK died, you were audio salve to the burning city, people. Your voice a soft sermon soothing the masses, speaking coolly to flames, spinning black records across the airwaves, spreading the gospel of soul in a time of fire. Joycetta says she bruised her thumbs snappin' to Marvin's "Got to Give It Up" and I believe her.

## *Essay by* Kevin Young

**L**ANGSTON HUGHES's famous "Mother to Son" is a poem of intergenerational understanding. Direct and accessible, Hughes's poem nonetheless displays a doubleness, in that we're given a son recounting, in the mother's voice, what his mother once said to him. It's powerfully generous to the mother, but it also admits something about the son's knowledge that has come from the mother. A poem of mother-wit, a poem about passing along knowledge, it's also a poem of metaphor. It's not a straight line. The poem's concluding line (also given at the beginning), "life for me ain't been no crystal stair," may seem straightforward, but we should hear it communicating resilience and a kind of resistance that is rooted in womanhood. The poem is both about resistance and about family as a kind of safe haven: it looks inward, but also looks outward. It drops the veil: it is given in the voice of someone else—a leap into the consciousness of another—but it isn't speaking for that person. A lesser poet would have written a poem to say, "This is what black mothers experience," or "This is what family does." Hughes, instead, enacts the experience: the telling is part of the testifying in the poem.

Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays" possesses the same sort of doubleness in presenting the belated realization of a father's love and the ways that love was manifested. Such love wasn't expressed in some conspicuously brave, outward fashion: instead, the father's love was bound up with the daily struggle, the daily survival, the daily tenderness involved in making "banked fires blaze" and warming and polishing the son's good shoes. And now the son has come to understand, in the unforgettable line that closes the first stanza, that "No one ever thanked him."

Sundays too my father got up early  
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,  
then with cracked hands that ached  
from labor in the weekday weather made  
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.  
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,  
and slowly I would rise and dress,  
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,  
who had driven out the cold  
and polished my good shoes as well.  
What did I know, what did I know  
of love's austere and lonely offices?

Being a parent can be the most glorious thing, but it doesn't come with an instruction manual or elicit a thank-you card, except for maybe once a year. In a revelation that seems to happen in real time, the speaker acknowledges that he has taken his father's love for granted, hasn't been able to see it: "What did I know, what did I know / of love's austere and lonely offices?" True love is revealed as a generous thing, given without expectation of reciprocation. Like "Mother to Son" but in its own way, "Those Winter Sundays" is about survival. Neither poem is sentimental, though each is deeply felt. Both poems speak to Black culture and survival and the family as this rooted place, but each avoids the pitfalls of sentimentality because they're both talking about difficulty—in detail and via metaphor and in ways that are particular. The very title "Those Winter Sundays" might suggest something that could easily turn out to be a charming, sweet portrait, and instead we're given something dark and damp but ultimately more powerful because of its depths. The poem itself is like a banked fire that blazes up.

Nikki Giovanni's "Nikki-Rosa" has that doubleness, too, and though it speaks in a different mode than either Hughes or Hayden, it incorporates the tones adopted by each of them. There's a mournful part that's nonetheless a celebratory expression of survival, and then added to these layers is a kind of irony that works really fruitfully in the poem. It's a memory poem, a poem of salvage from Giovanni's childhood, but it's also a poem of resistance in the spirit of her fellow poet Lucille Clifton, who titled one of her poems "why people be mad at me sometimes." Giovanni begins "Nikki-Rosa" by observing

childhood remembrances are always a drag  
if you're Black  
you always remember things like living in Woodlawn  
with no inside toilet  
and if you become famous or something  
they never talk about how happy you were to have  
your mother  
all to yourself

“if you become famous” is a bit of humblebragging, but Giovanni is also saying that there's this part of a family's poverty that isn't poor *feeling*. Most Black people I know have that experience of not knowing they're poor in the sense of being different from everyone around you. *Everyone* was poor, and yet there comes this weird moment when it seems that you've got to feel bad about your upbringing, at least here, where she's responding to a white person or to people utterly detached from such a childhood. As she writes later in the poem: “I really hope no white person ever has cause / to write about me / because they never understand / Black love is Black wealth.” She is asserting that her own memories are different than the remembrances you're supposed to deliver in some sort of official, obligatory way. To go back to Hughes, she is suggesting that “life ain't no crystal stair, but let me tell you, it was kind of fun sometimes.” She writes, “your biographers never understand / your father's pain as he sells his stock”—referring to a middle-class suburban housing development outside Cincinnati that was fiercely resisted for years by the local whites—“and another dream goes / And though you're poor it isn't poverty that / concerns you.”

What's important to tease out here is that Giovanni is saying that the problem with poverty isn't being poor; it's all the other problems that come with it and the assumptions made about it. You saw something analogous during the George Floyd protests, where you couldn't even say “Black Lives Matter” without people arguing with you, even though that would seem to be a pretty clear statement. (One of the brilliant things about Black Lives Matter is how it asks you to make the smallest contention on earth and white people still have a problem

with that.) With poverty, people often don't understand that "it isn't poverty that / concerns you," but what's important is that everyone is together. That togetherness is encapsulated in Giovanni's maxim "Black love is Black wealth." Family adds up to more than the sum of its parts—and so does Black experience, which can seem, if you just take it in something like an abstract way, like a set of linked tragedies ending in death. But that *isn't* Black life. "Black love is Black wealth," a love that outweighs any material thing, is in fact a radical thing for Giovanni to say. There's a kind of pity that she's rejecting outright. Here again, as with the Hughes and Hayden poems, there's a refusal of pity, a refusal of sentimentality in the service of a deeper recognition of feeling.

We can see here the bridge between the intimacy of the family and the larger embrace of the community. Jamila Woods, praising a renowned and beloved DJ in her prose poem "Ode to Herb Kent," goes further and summons the spirit of her Chicago community through the recollections of his voice on the radio:

Your voice crawls across the dashboard of Grandma's Dodge Dynasty on the way home from Lilydale First Baptist. You sing a cocktail of static and bass. Sound like you dressed to the nines: cowboy hat, fur coat & alligator boots. Sound like you lotion every tooth. You a walking discography, South Side griot, keeper of crackle & dust in the grooves.

This community, invoked through this disembodied voice on the radio, unites the secular and the sacred in something that is holy. Both Black music and Black poetry have an interest in regarding, at times, the community as a kind of congregation. Now I wouldn't want to paint a picture of that community too idealistically, as something only positive. Sometimes there's a tension between the self and the group. In Langston Hughes's long poetic sequence "Montage of a Dream Deferred," to me the ultimate poem about community, he's writing about how these torsions within community are nonetheless part of the community, and the various ruptures and—to speak metaphorically—the kind of notes that a European tradition would

call wrong notes or blue notes become exactly what the music is built around. There's always this kind of split even as there is connection. But the connection is there. Woods's "Ode to Herb Kent" celebrates it, along with the forms of communal memory that have taken shape over time:

When the West Side rioted the day MLK died, you  
were audio salve to the burning city, people. Your  
voice a soft sermon soothing the masses, speaking  
coolly to flames, spinning Black records across the  
airwaves, spreading the gospel of soul in a time of  
fire. Joycetta says she bruised her thumbs snappin'  
to Marvin's "Got to Give It Up" and I believe her.

As reservoirs of memory, communal music is akin to poetry itself, the poetry that has sustained us and changed us and predicted our futures and brought them into being. As Elizabeth Alexander writes, "Black celebration is a village practice that has brought us together in protest and ecstasy around the globe and across time. Community is a mighty life force for self-care and survival. But it does not protect against murder." Yes, it doesn't stop bullets the way it might or should. Yet people find themselves reaching for poetry in times of protest and stress and death, to help express that complex of emotions that can be found in these poems—that mix of pride, protest, and resistance, sometimes resignation, sometimes ironic survival or defiance. What poetry can do is name something over and over and over again. You're not going to forget what's been said. And that kind of resonance down the generations is, ultimately, the power of poetry.

## *Discussion Questions*

1. Are there experiences in these poems that seem familiar to you or that you recognize in your own life?
2. Robert Hayden and Nikki Giovanni look back retrospectively on their childhoods, but each poet adopts a markedly different tone when recalling how they feel about their family relationships. Describe the differences in tone between these two poems.
3. In the poems by Giovanni and Woods, the experience of family is intertwined with the recollected pleasures of community. What are some of the experiences each poet is fondest of, and do they overlap?
4. Nikki Giovanni makes the point that African American lives are often misunderstood by those who aren't Black. What in these three poems might be misunderstood, and why?
5. Families and communities are cemented through bonds of affection and love. How is love represented in these three poems?

**Poems for further reading**

Langston Hughes, "Mother to Son"

Margaret Walker, "For My People"

Etheridge Knight, "The Idea of Ancestry"

Mari Evans, "I Am a Black Woman"

Natasha Trethewey, "Miscegenation"

Danez Smith, "dinosaurs in the hood"