

1-1-2015

Nameless People, Keep Trekking

Brandi Webster

Recommended Citation

Webster, Brandi, "Nameless People, Keep Trekking" (2015). *Slave Narrative - Short Stories*. 1.
http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/special_collections_slave_narrative/1

This Short Story is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Collections at Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Slave Narrative - Short Stories by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact repository.library@miami.edu.

Nameless People, Keep Trekking

By Brandi Webster

Mah deep brown thighs tremble beneath de force of de mighty wind as I sprint hungrily, impatiently, and wildly like de lion of a heart dat roars equitably within me. Mah elongated legs soar like de wings of de eagle, unremittingly reaching for land strong enough to catch 'em. Switchin' and twistin' under de moon, I burst through de empty thickness of de rising fog, feet smashin' against de private world of de grass town beneath and de coolness of de air above. This steaming blood crushes through mah body and I struggle to inhale de very thang I'm dashin' through. Ducking swiftly under dense boughs and diving ova sick trees too fatigued to stand erect, wishing I cud help dem but I'd risk lying still and quiet ma'self. Hazy thick fog and emaciated trees gird me, as if to swallow me and mah mud-stained body inside of their loud shadows. I feel like an ant running with legs incomparable to the size of the bush it's trying to escape from.

I slow down to force mah steps to shorten and pause in this race to freedom to squint in search of direction, but grasp no clear path with mah eyes. I run right into a musty puddle of water with gregarious gnats floatin' 'round, enjoyin' each otha. Bending over this small body of water, yet large to de gnats, mah hands push against mah trembling knees, squishing de lines together into one big collage of greater darkness. I catch a dim glimpse of mah face in dat shallow puddle.

It's crazy how de water, shallow or wit great depth, gives a pure reflection of whatever presents itself in its reflective presence. But underneath dat clear water lies me, and mah mama, and mah papa, and their parents and their parent's parents, and everyone in this slave torture with us. We are de mud dat strongly embraces one's feet. We are de medium dat gives a tree nourishment to enter life, de holder of nutrients and beneficial thangs. De keepers of shells and

rocks with their past stories. We are shade for elephants and worms as they sink beneath, and de earth people go in when they can't bear to be. We are de dirt, de dirt of de sea, me and mah known and unknown family.

I look into this puddle with slanted eyes de color of coconut skin. De darkness plays games with mah vision. Gravity pulls on mah sweat as it glides and rides de hills of mah fo'head and cheeks onto de tip of mah nose with great attachment. It struggles, but finally lets go, dropping into a dark world of water dat looks just like it, but this drop has gone through some thangs. It enters de puddle and ripples submit to de command of its force, ordering de whole puddle to move. But de water goes back to bein' still after a while.

As I lean ova, still staring, mah eyes are wide open and mah black curls dangle ova mah fo'head and ova my neck.

While sucking air through mah nostrils, I wonder, *Where did she go Lawd? Where is dat young girl who knew not of what I feel now?* I thirst for freedom, thirst not even to struggle with the weight of carrying wings. I just want to be spirit, submitting all of my pain into the embrace of the hands of God Almighty.

I wish I cud go back to being dat young girl, but one day I'd have to face de truth anyhow, so I disregard de helpless thought

Mah head falls down, submitting to defeat, and I wonder what de rest of this body will do. Conform or rebel? Mah back is aching and mah eyes are tight, straining to fight against de thrusting water swelling behind them. Beyond mah body, mah hope is dying.

"Hmmm," I exhale, liberating from a deep place a sorrowful cry forced into secrecy. Abandoning mah heart, too, are doubts and fears and frustration dat has dwelled within for years.

Peace comes for a quick second but only passes by, continuing on wit de breeze. Still leaning, mah curls jump and twist in the wind.

I gaze past de gentle ripples straight to de bottom, where de truth lies, into me.

“Lil nigger, get yo tail over hea,” Mr. Boatman yelled. “Why can’t you do a got damn thing right, huh? I said, get your little black ass over hea now!” he screamed.

Mr. Boatman’s endless screaming at me learned me something. Told me what I was slowly realizin’.

“You’s my property, so whatever I say you do” he told me ova and ova agin.

At first, I didn’t undastand him. *Why was I now a slave and mah parents wasn’t?* When I watched ‘em go out to de fields, they never complained. I even seen them stare at each other and disappear sometimes behind de tall grass. They did this often. When I cudn’t see ‘em, I peacefully watched de black birds in de air chase each otha. De sky was almost always light blue, with small portions of fat clouds floatin’ on by.

Back in Mali I watched de birds too, but instead of peekin’ out de window, I lived outside wit ‘em, dancin’ with de wind and mah friends.

I was 15 when mah parents and I were forced into de stiffness of a ship, forced with wooden spears with sharp steel on de end. I came face to face with one before Mama yanked and wrapped me in her arms. Noise crowded the air. Heat terrified me, as it was all I could breathe. She warned me to close mah eyes and keep ‘em closed until she said so. I was insubordinate.

I heard the deep and raw screams of men and the painful cries of women every day of our ten day voyage. I cudn’t shut mah eyes at the blood and gruesome sights I’d seen even if I wanted to.

I grew hungry plenty of times too. While people fought over meat thrown on de groun’ Papa always found a way to get a piece for me and Mama. He wore a stern face with eyes dat

always looked wet, but I never seen him cry. I never seen him wear dis countenance nor did I see him eat much.

We arrived in a different land and I saw White people for de first time. A lot of 'em. Families were being pulled apart left and right. Mama and Papa held on to me. I searched for mah people, mah friends from back home because I hadn't seen them, not once, on the ship. I didn't succeed.

Girls jus' like me were being snatched from their parents' arms. A woman with blue eyes met mine as I stood between mah parents. This woman whispered into de White man's ear next to her. We, me, Ma, and Pa ended up headin' home with dem de same day.

Mrs. Rose, de White woman, let me and Sue help in de Kitchen. Sue was their only daughter. I heard they cudn't have no moe children. Something like, Mrs. Rose was too old, Sue said. We helped put away dishes for Mrs. Rose, who enjoyed cleanin' and makin' everything smell like lemon. We did minor work 'round de yellow house, and I loved sneakin' mah toes on de livin' room carpet where de green furniture sat. It was so soft.

When de sun fell, I ran to our cabin and Mama and Papa walked de short distance back 'round de same time. We bathed in de back, and after they told me stories 'bout everythang.

"De lion silently snuck up behind de bushes" Papa spoke slowly, with his deep voice as he drew closer and roared like a lion before grabbing me and diggin' his face into mah stomach, holdin' me in de air.

"Put de child down before you slip and make her fall too. You can fall but not her," Mama said with her beautiful Malian voice, smilin' wit her eyebrows raised which let Papa know dat she was still serious. So Papa let go of mah good meat and went and attacked her and hers.

I laughed at Mama as she tried to fight back but Pa was too strong and quick. I watched them a lot and saw how they laughed so much. I felt their love fo each otha and fa me too.

Mr. and Mrs. Rose were, besides mah Ma and Pa, de kindest people I know'd. They gave me hot apple pie, which I liked very much.

I often heard one of Mrs. Rose's White guests say to her when they thought no one was listening something like, "Susan, why do you keep them together? These slaves shouldn't be building a family and feeling comfortable here; they are your workers. Shame on you. Shame, shame, shame! We were made to be royalty and to treat each other, you and I, equally dear. Love your neighbor the Bible says. Well my neighbor is Molly Gale and her prominent husband Jackson who I just heard has a very successful business down on 8th street called *Gale's Clothing Store*. They're the type of people who deserve love right?" She agreed with herself. "But anyway, consider my words dear. O and of course, speakin' of the Gale's, I'll greet them this evening. Wouldn't want an opportunity to have the finest clothed in town pass me by." She giggled hysterically, falling back into the green sofa I wasn't permitted to sit on, slapping her thighs.

Mrs. Rose smiled, but hesitated in accompanying her guest in her reaction. She often did this with many of her guests. I didn't understand everythang but I could feel something wasn't right, like she didn't like her friends – not because she didn't want to, but because she didn't know how to. It appeared to me that she didn't feel like one with her own kind. I would know more if Mr. Rose hadn't caught me peekin' at them during their conversation. Thankfully, I didn't get in much trouble. He jus' told me it wadn't polite listen'n to grown folks conversations and sent me out back.

Those were de days. Yea, where even getting in trouble was fun. But mah memory of 'em are hastily fadin' like de sunset.

He first appeared while I was sleepin' in de cabin I'd never seen him befo' at the house. Ma and Pa were distant from the cabin. I know because they didn't bust through the shabby wooden door, charge at Mr. Boatman, and tear his head off instantly after hearing my scream.

He flipped me ova and held both of my wrist tightly in the palm of his. I kicked and tried to protect myself from this stranger but to no avail. He beat mah face until mah nose bled and mah eyes swole up until I could not see . Sometime while he met my face with his heavy fist, I passed out and found ma'self tied up riding de bumps of the road layin' in a rickety wagon. The flo' was stained and smelled like whisky mixed wit mold. Through mah slight sight, I stared at the stains, which began to appear more beautiful compared to mah situation. I didn't know why I was where I was, where this stranger would take me, or why. I shut mah hurtin' eyes like Mama tried to get me to do on the ship, unsure if that helped the pain or not, swallowing mah tears and seekin' an inner silence.

“God, please see me through.”

Papa told me many stories, but we didn't talk about stories like dis. Last we talked, they was tellin' me that one day we was gon be free. I realized on dat lengthy drive to de middle of nowhea dat I'd rather be without flashy stuff or anything else jus to have dem.

I knew our tiny cabin didn't quite match the luxury of the Roses' home, and when Mama and Papa and the other workers worked, they sweated rivers, yet Mr. Rose didn't. He wasn't mean but he simply watched from time to time, never getting' dirty and musty like you s'pose to afta hard workin'. He didn't slay under the sun, use the steel plow, plant or collect the harvest nearly as much as Mama and Papa. I understood why Sue slept in her own bed and why me, Mama, and Papa hugged each otha to fit on de bed at night. I understood dat on de day we arrived families was gettin' ripped apart to work and be trapped, not to be free. I understood dat

de apple pie the Roses gave me was a cover up, not a kind deed. I understood dat de peace I had as a child was only because I didn't undastand de truth of de world. Black and White made us different. The only white I found on me were on the palms of mah hands and bottoms of mah feet. I guess dat wadn't good enuff.

My new life started off real old and tiresome. I wadn't young no moe.

Shortly after arriving to Boatman's plantation, he chained me to a bed to ensure I wouldn't leave. He invited a woman in to see me. She spoke over me declaring that I was just what they needed to get work done around there and supply de field wit chil'en. They told me what I was to be doing, insensitive to mah aching body and temporary blindness. So I laid still, taking in their voices and listening to my responsibilities until they left. I thought about Ma, and how she had to be broken right now because she cudn't hold me. And Pa, and how he faced every challenge thinking about the end. I tried to muster the same faith. I tried, but cudn't.

That same night, after crying and exacerbating the pain in mah eyes, Boatman reentered the cabin and tore me open wit his manhood. Didn't take him long to realize his desire for mah body, so he had his way with me in dat way obsessively: in de mornin' after workin' de field, when I finished dinner, and sometimes in de middle of de night, pumpin' my purity and innocence away wit his filth all inside me, takin' what wadn't his.

I came to find out, once my eyes healed, that his wife had been de very same woman dat sat on the green sofa and cackled at her own jokes. She was Mrs. Rose's *friend*. What kind of friend steals from someone they care about? Their house was neatly decorated and spacious. They didn't need me.

Mr. Boatman beat me on the head with a rolled up newspaper for doing things my way. He did this for years to show who was in charge.

“Why wasn’t my paper delivered into my hands?”

“Well sir, you’ve asked me to clean the kitchen, cook breakfast, wash and hang yours and Mrs. Boatman’s clothes, then feed the herd and-

“I know what I asked you. But how can I enjoy my coffee without my paper?”

“I found that least important sir?”

“So now you’re gonna tell me what’s important? Huh? You think you smarter than me gal?”

“No suh, I do not.”

“Well shut your mouth and get my paper.”

“Yessa” I said plainly, with hate burning in my heart.

My sweet heart resisted, although it longed to love. Just not him.

I often sat outside Boatman’s big house, my skin glazed in the sunlight and sweat, pulling up patches of grass and gazing over the white gate enclosing their land. I’d sit there staring beyond it into the trees, thinking of Ma and Pa and what they’d be doing. Boatman showed me his shotgun immediately after I could see and warned me to not even think of escaping. I did it anyway. He may have my body, but he will not have my mind.

I hoped Ma and Pa still had fun far out there in the field alone, where no one could see ‘em. Having each other made them happy.

Five years dragged by. One day, before the sun had even risen, as I sat outside the cabin I slept in peeling the brown skin off the potatoes I thought, *Why did the skin have to go to waste? Why is my life just like the brown peels?*

I cried and laughed at the same time at de foolery I found ma'self in. De flame of de candle must've found it funny too because it bounced up and down like mah stomach, castin' mah shadow against the wooden wall next ta me. This man has stole mah life from me because I've surely not lived. I died when I was ripped away from mah family. And I guess he was right – I did become his property, his slave.

I put de potato I was jus 'bout to peel down in the bowl and stood up from de hard wooden flo'. It was still deep dark out, sun gone, full moon awake, and I felt I had ta do something.

I wondered if I should kill 'em. Yea, yea, dat would be good.

No! I rethought. I am not ugly like him. I hope God wud one day show him His wrath. Vengeance is de Lord's.

I snuck inside de house, stole de matches from de fireplace and quietly withdrew back ta da cabin.

“What shud I do?” I whispered to mahself, while bitin' down on my index finger, pacing the wooden floor.

I looked at de only bed I ever had to ma'self. Without thinkin' a second longer, I struck de match and watched it catch fire. I let it go, watchin' it fall onto mah cotton sheet, growing stronger until a hole formed right before mah eyes with orange and red flying.

I snapped out of amazement and backed out of de door. I rushed out. I finally did it!

Ain't no way he's gon try to save me once he sees this place burnin' down. I'll be dead to him and alive to me.

I jumped the fence and ran into a frightenin' darkness.

I turned back and looked through the low palm branch and its long leaves and cudn't believe it. Did I see the devil lookin' at me?

Boatman was starin' past the fire right into mah direction, stiff, as if he cud see mah brown self in de black woods.

"Can he see me?" I breathed. I felt cold as he just stood there, unmoved, certain he knew where I was.

He probably was getting ready to do his business with me again, but not hea. No, no moe. I turned and dashed with all mah might.

The wind presses against mah back and pushes me, as if to warn me to keep going despite mah evaporating strength, forward into deeper darkness.

"God, I... need ya," I yell in mah soul and I whisper through de thickness of mah lips.

I pick myself up again and go. Black vines dangle in whispering winds. Wish I could grip one and swing wid it, take refuge in one of those high branches up there calmly swaying, and stare at the sparkling stars so clear in the purple-bruised sky.

How is it dat they are so peaceful? Bullets are coming to tear mah flesh apart, knives to perversely mark dis body dat has already been cut up by the blade of mistreatment, labor, and ugly words. Yet, they sway in the darkness with intricate arms stretching all over, like a child reaching up towards her father because she knows dat in his arms she'll find safety and comfort. I wonder who de trees reach fa as they play in the wind, leaves rustling and wresting each otha like nothing goes on down below dem, here, where de little people are.

To de world, nighttime comes after every day, but I see dat dis here darkness never leaves. I'm running against time wid closing proximity. It releases its hot breath and sends it to permeate the minute hairs on mah neck. Mixing in wid the water dat seeps from my pores, it travels down mah spine into the crack of eternal darkness, migrating further with every wide, uncertain step mah feet leaps intah. Mah heart, buried beneath mah drenched, decrepit gown and

wrapped in between mah flattened chest and back, dances violently, far more than how it used tah in mah homeland. Instead of tilting mah head back and digging wit mah voluptuous hips, carving through air around burnin' flames with joy flarin' up and sizzlin' within mah soul from the hasty pounding beat of the djembe drums; instead of smiling wit my warm smooth cheeks, tapping my ears and encouraging them tah gently listen to dat inner sweet tune mah heart created from de bliss of freedom, instead I run as swiftly as de cheetah and as anxiously as the gazelle it seeks to devour. My shadow has been so kind to me though, the only friend besides the Lawd dat has listened and seen it all.

I continue running to de smack of mah soles slapping against de ground and thirsty brown leaves crackling under de cracks of mah feet, crickets chattering, bushes rattling, unclear echoes permeating, and no clarity of where to go. Although I am unsure of dis physical jungle, the jungle of mah soul rattles with fear, yet with a spark of determination. Dis is more than mah freedom. It's de freedom of every speck of dirt dat lies down and is stepped over carelessly, unnoticeably, and without remorse. I know dat no matter what I do though, I absolutely mustn't cease to run.

Mama, Papa, I'm comin' home.