

STEPHANIE JOY TISDALE

Stephanie Joy Tisdale is an educator, writer, and vocalist. Born and raised in Philly, she attended Howard University and Lincoln University where she studied literature and education. She is currently a PhD student at Temple and spends her time cooking, reading, practicing yoga, listening to music, and studying nature. She hopes to give voice to the experiences of her Ancestors and would like to learn from and collaborate with other writers in this journal. The call for submissions for Root Work was so compelling that she knew she owed it to herself and her people to offer a potential contribution.

Uncaptured

Abstract: Enslavement and freedom are sometimes waves in the very same ocean. Titi, Ma, and NaNa are “swimmers” whose powers go beyond the confines of the world designed to control them. They create freedom for themselves by way of their magical abilities: ebbing and flowing like the river stream.

“How do it feel?”

“How do what feel?” Ma replied.

“It” she asked shyly. She kept shucking the corn and never looked up but could feel Ma’s eyes on her.

“Hmmm” Ma stopped moving her hands and got real quiet like she always did when she was thinking.

“It be kinda like when ya go for a swim ‘cept you never rise up for more air. You just stays there. You let the bubbles mix with the water and breathe on through it.” Ma picked up another piece of corn and began pulling the green layers away. She threw down the husks but the silky shreds underneath seemed to sparkle as they floated towards the pile below.

“Tha’s when ya use ya magic” Ma whispered. “You swim wid all da life ya have inside a you.”

She turned towards Titi and grabbed her face in her hands. “Wid all da life ya have, hear me?” a leaned closer, connecting her daughter’s forehead with her own. Quiet tears streamed down her face and Titi closed her eyes.

It sounded like a whistle, the whip. It was quick, moving faster than the two had time to separate.

“What I tell ya ‘bout all that whisperin?” paul said. He wobbled towards them smelling like rum and damnation. “Ya sposed to be shuckin this here corn. Not whisperin bout foolishness.” He cracked the whip again. This time Titi sat a little straighter. Ma reached up to pat the blood trickling from her head, trying to find where the whip split open her skin.

paul walked in front of them and looked at the barrel of unfinished corn. “I ‘spect this to be finished ‘fore the missus get home, ya hear?” Ma nodded, catching the blood with a piece of green husk. Titi’s tears boiled inside her eyelids, but she wouldn’t let them fall.

Not long after they sold Ma away. Titi heard NaNa say that the missus complained about how close Ma was to Titi. And that the old man do anything to keep her mouth shut so he got rid of Ma.

NaNa worked in the kitchen and heard lots of things that would whisper themselves out of the house, down the road, and into the field.

It all happened so fast, but NaNa made sure Ma knew before it was time to go. One night Titi woke up to hear Ma whispering with NaNa in the cabin.

“I ain’t goin” Ma said bitterly.

“So wha’ ya do?” NaNa whispered back. “You is dead woman fa sure.”

“Who gonna tend to my Titi?”

“Same one tend to you. NaNa.”

“NaNa you in the house most of the time they don’t ‘flow no field chillun.” Ma was sobbing now. “I took da whip mo’ times I can even count. Got scars up and down, rings on my wrist from da iron.”

“Been starved. Snatched from the field by a gang of ‘em and thrown back with blood pouring from ‘tween my legs.”

“Hush, Fola” NaNa got up from her place on the floor and moved closer to Ma. She reached down to wipe the tears from Ma’s face.

“This..” Ma’s chest heaved as she tried to push the words out.

“Be the thang...” she gasped.

“That take me outside myself.”

“Ssshhh” NaNa said more forcefully.

“I been where you be now” she whispered. “I see ting that stay in ma mind night and day. Ting that are sobad bad” NaNa whispered.

“Titi mine NaNa.” Ma’s voice softened. Her body was exhausted from the field and the heart-break.

“When you tink bout it, really tink. She be mine too ” NaNa replied. She continued to rub Ma’s head as Ma drifted to sleep. “Just like you, Fo-lá-sa-dé.” NaNa sounded out every syllable of Ma’s real name.

NaNa came over from the Great Land with Titi’s Grandma on a boat and she knew Ma since before she was born. According to NaNa, Grandma wasn’t ever able to adjust to the cruel new world. She transitioned into the spirit realm leaving Ma and her brother Ògúndé in NaNa’s care.

NaNa had country marks on her face from her own home and sometimes sang songs around the cabin in

her mother’s tongue.

The next night, the one before Ma left, the fog was thick. The cabin was empty as some of the others stayed elsewhere to give Ma her time with Titi.

“Titiladé, come” Ma said. Ma never used Titi’s real name out loud much. Mostly out of fear. But today was different.

She pulled Titi close to her and their foreheads touched. Titi could see flashes of Ma’s smile as the slivers from the full moon’s light danced across her face.

“You is mine” Ma said. “And we is forever” she reached out her right hand and placed it on Titi’s heart.

“Who you is and who I be is one. Since before there was a me or you, we was us.”

“I got thangs I know I how to do. An you got that same gift too” Ma said.

“But I knows that today ain’t da day, nor will tomorrow be the day I use ‘em.”

Tears streamed down Titi’s face.

“Just ‘member like I said. Let the bubbles mix with the water and breathe on through.” Ma wiped the tears from Titi’s warm face.

“Yo job is to find out what this world be all about. Not what da missus or da old man or crazy paul say it is.

They just likey to fall off the face of the earth for how evil they be to the bone.”

“That ain’t none of yo’ concern. If they do or don’t. Will or if dey won’t. You don’t answer to them cuz you ain’t come from ‘em. And when ya old and gray you won’t return to ‘em neither.”

“The Great Land is your start. Thousands and thousands of years ago is when life all began right there.

It’s where my Ma come from too. Used to call her ‘eeeyaah.’ I was lil one just like you when she mix the plants with the water and went to sleep for the last time.”

Titi had heard this story before but this time was different.

Ma grabbed Titi in her arms. “This ain’t the battle...this ain’t the fight. There be war soon enough and I can’t risk messin’ thangs up for all the sistren and brothers.” She squeezed Titi tight.

“You and I is sworn in. Blood in to the secrecy. So I’s got to hold on ‘til it’s done. Ya under-

stand me?"

Titi nodded afraid to say any words at all. She wanted Ma's voice to be the only sound in her mind. She laid in Ma's arms that night but couldn't sleep. Before the sun rose, Ma got up to head to the house.

NaNa gave her a small packet filled with special herbs and told Ma to hold on to it with her life. "Blood in to da secret" NaNa said, placing her forehead to Ma's.

"Blood in" Ma replied.

After a while Titi gave up on ever seeing Ma again. NaNa heard she was sent so far from the grapevine the messages couldn't whisper to her. One day as the sun was setting NaNa asked Titi to go to the river with her. Titi thought that was odd because NaNa never let her tag along so close to night.

NaNa packed her basket with the stick and string she used to fish. "Let us go catch us something" she said as she grabbed Titi's hand.

They walked past the other cabins, where other people from the field lived. There was Rome and his wife Queen who came from the same place as NaNa. She stopped to talk to them in her mother's tongue.

After hugging them and saying goodbye, NaNa grabbed Titi's hand and they entered the woods. Titi had been this way many times before with Ma and Uncle Ògúndé. As they walked closer to the river's edge, the trees seemed to close the path behind them. Titi looked back but could no longer see the cabins.

"NaNa..."

"Hush" NaNa whispered sharply.

As they came to the riverbank, NaNa began humming a song from the Great Land. She sat the basket on the rocks, took out the stick and string and attached the bait. Titi stood close beside her as she dipped the fish string in the water.

There was a woman on the other side of the bank washing clothes. And a man further down who was also fishing.

"Hol' this. I go to the bush" NaNa said, handing Titi the stick. "Go close to the edge so you can catch the fish."

Titi did as she was told and waited for NaNa to relieve herself.

Somewhere between the string pulling her in and NaNa pushing her from behind, Titi ended up in the water.

Submerged, she felt something, someone, grab both her arms and pull her even lower.

She could hear NaNa screaming above the surface but the noise underwater was louder. When Titi opened her eyes she saw Ma's face in front her. Ma motioned for Titi to inhale and breathe the water in.

Titi began to inhale the water. As it filled her lungs, she felt lighter, freer. Ma wiggled the stick out of Titi's hand and let it float to the surface. She turned, wrapped Titi's arms around her waist, and began to swim.

Ma swam quickly and effortlessly. Titi drifted in and out of consciousness. She was in another world, or seemed to be, and could do nothing else but surrender to the current.

When Titi woke up she was lying on the riverbank in Ma's arms.

"Maaa" she croaked as tears rolled down her face.

"Ah yes my own Titi" Ma said, rubbing her face. "Ssshhhh. Don't you worry. You is alright"

"But how...and what about...what about...NaNa" Titi began to cry.

"NaNa fine as fine can be. She say she too 'ol to be takin the swim no more but she knowed they believe it if she say you drowned" Ma said. "They know NaNa love you bout as much as me

and she won't never let nothin happen to ya."

"I done run with a group of peoples" Ma said proudly. "Some from our field, some from other places but we all here for the same thang" Ma said. "Freedom.

"I knew I had to come for you and I had to figure the best way to do it. So this time, I decided to use my power and take the swim. I know you know how, 'cause ya mine. But when ya asked me I figure that mean you be ready soon enough" Ma explained, hugging her tightly.

"First time's always a lil hard but you just hold on and breathe, let ya lungs and ya memory do the rest."

As Titi sat up, silhouettes emerged from behind the trees near the river's edge.
The silhouettes turned into clearer shapes and the clearer shapes turned into people.
As they came closer to Titi, they each took turns to kneel down and touch foreheads with Titi.

"Blood in to the secrecy" Ma said

"Blood in" each one replied.

