

Fredrick Woodard

MUSIC LESSONS

Mom sings stories of her youth:
Texas, cowboys—her cousins
[my uncles]—
ride security
for the colored settlements.

A horse those days was worth more trained
to make the night run
whinnying bodies awake
than the ones caught wild and rode
bareback for the sport
in a driving sun.

But her stories are rarely
about horses, rather place
as in home:
how Isam Reed, as Papa and captain of the guard,
cradles a Winchester, shoots
salt beads off crackers for sport
and traps the rabbits to eat
how children
haul the water in wooden barrels
and siphon their weight through hollow weeds
the mile home
how women gather
roots to fry or boil for drinks,
worms to tease chickens,
barks for the juju

She unbraids a tale
until once upon a time
is the end.

Oh, I catch her now and then,
me, in the breaks, a-waiting:

How come y'all be living
in the wild open
in them mud houses?

Well, we just do because . . .

Truth is, though,
Papa Reed gets tired
eating cracker crumbs and sleeping on empty
nights
strikes out for himself
drives his folks like cattle
and stakes claim
to land nobody misses
until folk's grown and long gone.

I get to the side stories
studying Mom's face
as she tunes up the edges
like the times
she calls me "Iron-jaw Pete"
and trails off
into affectionate laughter:
It's then I
wait
and I see
a
real story
between the laughter and the next breath.
It says: you . . .
you the spitting image of Papa
and you ain't even yet a reed.

What you learn first to know for true is
you really can choose your kin
stand them up:
storytime
lines and spaces,
Isam, uncles, ants, and crickets
one and all
the same night
in the same corner
of the living room
all and one
the same night, playing
the victrola of her voice.