My Mother’s House

Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah

*Easy is the descent to the underworld:*
the doors of gloomy Dis stand open day and night.
*But to retrace your steps and emerge into the open air,*
this is work, this is the toil.

—*The Aeneid*

We came to Alexandria to see the house at 205 Lowerline. The house where my great-grandmother, my grandmother, my mother and her two sisters all lived together—until one by one they left, called away by either death or work. When they moved, they left behind that old house, full of its furniture and the antiques my aunts still sigh about. The house, which had been in our family so long that the neighbors sometimes called the entire street by my family’s last name, was not willed to anyone or rented, it was simply abandoned—given to raccoons and looters, and the local boys who wanted a place to drink warm Boone’s Farm wine in peace on a sofa, not caring that its rusty springs sagged on down to the floor. When my grandmother left in 1984, she found a neighborhood man, someone she trusted, to be the caretaker. He was to cut the grass, daub any leaks, and just generally check up on things, but as the years passed his trustworthiness faded along with the distance between him and the slot machines at the Belle of Baton Rouge casino. By the time my grandmother got word of what was to happen to the house, it was too late. The long neglected structure was declared blighted and the City had already decided on a date to tear it down. I was a child when this all happened, but I remember that my grandmother did not leave her room in our house that day, and we did not hear any noise from the TV either.

“But what happened to our things?” I would ask my mother and aunts when they discussed 205 Lowerline, which is what they called it—never home or something more familiar. And depending on whom I directed the question to, I was answered differently: Auntie Rockie would give me a shrug and sigh and sadly shake her head; Auntie Conkie would flash angry eyes and purse her lips; and my mother would always give the most obvious answer of all: “They’re gone.”
IT SHOULD BE said early on: I am descended from world-class secret keepers. When I first began writing about my family, I made the mistake of sending them some of my work. Hours later, I received a call from one of them:

Are you out of your mind?
Did you read it?

Yes, I read it. What is wrong with you? Black people don’t go around telling stories about their family. Maybe it is true, maybe you really have spent too much time up there with those memoir writing white girls. I thought you knew better.

So, no black people have ever told stories about their families? Do you realize how crazy you sound?

No, the voice at the other end said. It’s not about the telling, it’s the writing it down.

Because of this secrecy, I cannot tell you certain things, like who my great-grandfather’s mother was, or how she came into the many acres of...
land we once owned, acres that quickly sprawled into nothing but headaches until my mother and aunts gave it away to the city to be turned into low-income housing. I do not know why my great-grandmother fled Baker, Louisiana as a young woman and never looked back. My questions and guesses are deemed impolite by my family, they are perceived to be the result of my not knowing any better because I was not born in Louisiana like my mother, or her mother, or her mother before that... and the list goes on. But after a while, all the mothers and their names get mixed up with the names of cattle and crops. Because that is simply what happens in places like Louisiana.

Alexandria's most famous native poet is, by far, Arna Bontemps, who was a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance and also a prolific author, writing at least twenty-four books including a book he wrote in 1945 about black migrants called *They Seek the City*. Bontemps, who left Louisiana at age three, tells in that book a version of a story my mother used to tell us before bed. He wrote: “In the old days during slavery or later, on share farms where freedom of action was denied, the one who planned a getaway would shout, ‘Bird in the Air!’ When all faces turned heavenward to search for a pair of wings, the Negro would dash for freedom. Before the most deeply concerned realized what was happening, he would be on his way.” On his way to where, a child wonders. But the adult knows the answer—to places even he can’t imagine.

Like this man dashing to freedom, all of us travel without knowing the outcome of our journeys. I did not intend to fly thousands of miles south just to fall down in the mud of Holly Oak Cemetery and weep hard and long. But in that graveyard that had become a swamp because of weather and neglect, I realized that even though I had searched and sometimes lost a shoe in the thick of it, the mud might be all that is left. Perhaps neither I nor anybody in my family would be able to place flowers and rosaries where they rest and say, “Yes, see this here: this is my family here. These are my people. This is where we came from, and we know this because we can read their headstones, their records, and their logs.” We cannot ever know for sure that we have found them. These are the consequences of a history I cannot change. This is what happens when the names of cattle and crops are recorded alongside those of your foremothers. Mud. That was it. Mud, that was us.

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*We arrived in Louisiana with high hopes during Lent, a time when the state seems to slumber. We made the plan a few months before. We would leave New York and head to New Orleans, flying over Lake Pontchartrain, a brackish body of water that from above looks like a terrible idea next to a beautiful city. New Orleans is a city whose geography was manifested by*
Old World Europeans, people who didn’t care about the Chitimacha or Houma Indians who were there first, who didn’t care about mosquitoes or the swampy unknown. Men named Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d’Iberville and Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville, who wore cocked hats, and held rusted guns, and believed that with godspeed and indignation alone, they could bend back water and its will to rise and make such a place their home. And they did. The Louisiana in my own mother cultivated our wills young. She took us fishing. She liked to tell us we could run with the wolves, and when we rode horses or took dance lessons, she would drop us off and tell us to move like the wind. We were girls without fathers—it was something that my mother told us blankly, but to me it sounded like an inheritance.

When I met my guy, years later, I became very concerned with this bit of history. On bad nights he would hold me and keep me still, so that in my worry I did not capsize us both.

“You don’t get it, do you?” he would say, confidently, exhaling smoke from his cigarette. “You don’t get that we can have anything we want.”

And I would try to convince him that, as much I wanted him to be right, for my love to stay the tide, to push back water and make a home, what if he was wrong? What if this is where I had come from and where I was stuck?

“Then show me, he said, show me the thing that is so scary, and cannot ever be undone.”

“Show you?”

“Yes, take me there and show me.”

So I pushed pins into points of convergence. Places where our lives had intersected before we even knew the other existed. We never said much about it because we both knew that we were driving far away to see if we were closer than the world tells us is possible. Closer than some of my black relatives who told me, “Engagements are what white girls do.” And closer than some of his Jewish relations and friends who are made awkward and uncomfortable by my blackness. These things rattle us.

We decided to go first to Alexandria, and then head a few miles west to Camp Claiborne, where his deceased grandfather had been based when he enlisted to fight in World War II. I keep his FBI files in my desk. He was a veteran of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, openly Communist and Jewish—at Camp Claiborne, he was placed in an all-black brigade. He was not bothered to be there, only bothered that “in good old Army fashion we have separate messes and separate cars” and he is heart-sick without his wife. He suggests that she come down to Alexandria and take an apartment in town before he is deployed. In his letters to his new
wife, he writes, “It’s a helluva thing to have to say, but we’re going to be living in a part of the country where white chauvinism will blow in our faces like bad breath continuously.” He was right, but here, they conceived a child, a boy who, one day, will have a boy himself, a boy who will grow up to be the man who accompanies me on this journey. The journey that we take to see if there isn’t some way that his grandparents walked by my grandparents on one humid Friday night next to The Bentley Hotel in Alexandria, caught each other’s eyes, and smiled—not knowing that in the future, in cities far to the north, in a world made better by their fight, they would become each other’s family.

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We landed at Louis Armstrong Airport in the morning, rented a car, and drove into the heat of New Orleans, where a musician friend in the Bywater was generous and let us borrow a cottage in Henderson, a town that squats in the center of the boot, a place he told us wasn’t fancy. In fact, the house’s previous owners were low-level pot dealers who, after being arrested, lost the house to a sheriff’s auction. No, it was nothing glamorous, it was the country, but we would be able to eat well and sleep well, as Henderson was just a few miles from Breaux Bridge, “La Capitale mondiale de l’écrevisse” (“The Crawfish Capital of the World”), and at night the stars would be so bright, so close, God might be able to see us sitting in the front yard.

Our friend? He never told a lie. The house didn’t have much in the way of furniture, but it was a musician’s crib, so in every room there were records we liked, or good books about music we wanted to read. I knew we were home when, on the soap scummy bathroom sink, I found an autobiography of Sun-Ra. The kitchen held no food, no dishes, only straw baskets full of plastic fruit and a towering, dusty collection of half-filled bourbon bottles. We chose a room in the corner of the house with a small TV on a plastic desk, a plastic folding chair, and most importantly, a window that faced the field. There we would wake up late, watch reruns until noon, and only get up when we got hungry. Most mornings we would drive down the road to The Boudin Shop and order fried chicken and biscuits served by white ladies with gold teeth, who scared us until they smiled. “You gon’ have to wait then. Least ten minutes,” they’d say sucking their teeth as if the inconvenience was theirs. Twenty minutes later they would hand us bundles of small, grease-pocked paper bags. And while he—my man, my companion, my love—would fill the car up at the gas station next door, I would stock up on pralines and

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ice-cold Abita root beer and ask for a large plastic bag to carry it all. Prepared for the day, we would pull out into the dust of tractor-trailers and agree that even though when we first saw Henderson we were scared we would get lynched there, now we couldn’t imagine a day spent away from it.

In those lazy afternoons in Breaux Bridge, we haunted pawnshops and thrift stores, and looked at wooden Victrolas we could not afford, or mourning wreaths and brooches made of dead women’s hair. We forgot about getting to Alexandria and instead, we took long drives down roads framed by fields that looked empty except for houses that seemed to be built on the horizon and the occasional live oak whose huge limbs seemed to hold up the sky. We drove with my foot hanging out one window and his arm hanging out the other. At night if the weather was right we took comforters and beers to the field, and on our backs, lied to each other about which stars were Cepheus The King of Ethiopia, or Aquila The Eagle taking flight. He played the steel-string guitar he found in the living room, and I listened. This is where we promised for the first time to spend our lives together. Strange, the small signs and symbols we choose to mean that things have changed or will change. A white panther races fast across a plain of black above you. Someone tells you he likes the mole on your nose, the way you snore and struggle. He sees a future with you. We had been in Henderson for two days. Maybe I had been stalling on our plan to head to Alexandria, but I knew then that we could go—this was someone I could take home to a place I hadn’t seen since I was young, since before my memories knew how to make themselves last.
The next day we packed up our things and closed up the house.
“What if someone sees that we’re gone and breaks into the house to wait for us?”
“Why would they do that when the house is empty half of the time anyway?” he replied coolly.
“But what about the music we heard last night, and those men?”
“They live there.”
“I think I left the CDs on the counter.”
He closed the trunk and went back in, and when he returned he stood in the door.
“Anything else?” he asked.
“You have the keys?”
He patted his pocket, took out the keys and jiggled them in the air. This time, he put them in his back pocket.
“Are you sure you want to keep them there?” I asked. “If we lose them, we’ll be screwed. We don’t know anybody out here, all of our stuff would be locked in there, and we would have to drive to back to New Orleans and find Mark.”
Unconcerned, he got in the car, adjusted his seat and started the engine.
“Our stuff is in the trunk, and there are locksmiths in Henderson,” he said, patting my leg in a way I don’t like. “So, are you ready?”
“Yes,” I answered.
Then I put on my sunglasses, and the world turned amber brown.

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When my mother and her sisters left Louisiana, they settled in Philadelphia, D.C., and Atlanta; moves and destinations not at all particular to us. Historian Isabel Wilkerson has estimated that between 1910 and 1970, six million Black American migrants flocked to cities new to them. They were not merely desirous of finding their promised land, they trusted that physical distance would afford them a sense of rupture, a shift, a break from their past. It was a move away from memories of slavery and Jim Crow laws. Jazz, which I consider to be Toni Morrison’s best work, tells, on the surface, the story of Violet and Joe Trace, a migrant couple living in the city whose marriage and lives are undone by a young, fickle girl named Dorcas. As much as Jazz is the story of a love affair gone wrong, it also bellows something much greater. There, in its song, is a symphonic ode to urbanity and the wave of bodies called The Great Migration.

The city is where they each learn, like the many others who left the South for the gleam of something brighter, that as big and bold as the city can be, it is also where millions of dreams have been hunted, chased, and just as often, deferred. And the trip that is the inverse of that story, the one I take, is a
whisper rarely spoken about by people my age: The one back across the Mason-Dixon line, back to the South, back to place that was once home.

Perhaps, because I am now thirty, I’ve found that I want for my mother and her family in a way that even I don’t understand. This hunger for them, a biological tug to return, scares me—a hunger that goes unrequited, since I cannot go back into their arms, their wombs, or their laps. When I was very young, I could sit on my aunts’ beds and marvel at their Fashion Fair lipsticks, gold earrings, and eau de parfums. I could finger their lacy things, and with my false maturity, trick them into applying rouge on the apples of my cheeks or telling me things I was too young to hear. That is a nice time in anyone’s life, when you are so young that people think you are merely a bit of your mama that has slipped out, a precocious bit of her that listens but doesn’t hear or talks but doesn’t think. When you are young like this, they are open with you: They change their bras and don’t bother to turn their backs; they pass gas and don’t excuse themselves; they talk bad about people and never stop to think that you live off this kind of slander. But one day, all of that stops. As you get older, adults begin to care about keeping things from you. They block fast women, trashy boys, and bad movies from your sight. They do this because what you don’t know—your ignorance—is what makes you a child and makes them adults. In my family, despite the fact that I am old enough to have children, they prevent me from knowing what their childhoods were like. From each of them, I have heard a different story.

One of them—my mother—says it was filthy, so filthy that she has been forced to forget it. She remembers a house full of dogs, and curtains made of paper, and keeping her clothes in boxes instead of chests. But one day, she asks me and my soft-palmed self, “How do you think anybody lived? We weren’t rich. Nobody was. If it was bad, I don’t remember. If it was beautiful, I forget that, too. All I remember is wanting to leave, and I did.”

One aunt recalls more: A fig tree that fruited in August, and in September, sitting in the sun after school, still wearing her school clothes but no shoes, eating syrup-preserved figs on stale Melba toast that exploded in her cheeks as she sat on the front step of the house. She remembers sharing a bed with her own grandmother. The warmth. She remembers seeing the headless ghost of her grandfather, the one she never met. With his sleeves pulled up to his elbows, he sat at a sewing machine, tape measure around his shoulders, sewing a beautiful dress she could not see. And something else—she remembers standing in the street screaming, “Mama, no!” while her mother drove fast into town, where she would drink beer and dance hard. She screamed because she knew, even then, that such behaviors were
stones in the path to hell, something she had every reason to believe, because sitting inside watching the scene was her stern schoolteacher grandmother, who had told her so.

And another aunt, many years ago, in Virginia, pulled her car onto the side of road to tell me vagaries that explained much. “Listen,” she said. “There were five women living in one house, Rache. Five women with no men for fifty years, and back when people didn’t do that. So, sometimes it was very hard. Very, very hard. Grampy supported us all with her teaching. Money was tight, but she always provided. And I wouldn’t change it for the world. I remember cutting up and laughing like nobody would believe. But it was five women under a single roof, and during that third week of each month, you knew for sure, it was a house full of women... with all the wild that brings.”

I realized then, as I watched the cars zoom by, that in my family’s eyes, I was stuck in a perpetual girlhood. There, I would be estranged from the intimacies of their younger years until they decided differently. And in their elliptical telling, there was a pointed message. It was as if they had all agreed that my sister and I, as girls in a family of women, were allowed to share their blood and love, but this part of their lives, their dawn, was for them alone, because for us they had determinedly made something better. The reason this all came to my mind was because, as we turned onto the highway from Henderson, on the way to Alexandria, I called my mother to tell her that we were on our way, and my mother who wants, most of all, to forget about the past, and dissuade me from searching it out, was blunt: “I
can’t believe you all are going all the way up there to 205 Lowerline to really just see a lot?”

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AlexAndriA is a small town. The road that takes you there is straight. We passed the soybean crops and cattle farms. We listened to Led Zeppelin and Marvin Gaye’s “Here, My Dear.” And if we spoke, I cannot remember what we said. When we saw the exit for Alexandria, we turned off the highway onto a ramp and then onto Casson Street. And then I saw, for the first time, Alexandria, the city my family left. It looked not like a city, but an expansive bare lot. We made a left onto Third Street, and there we saw what happens to places deserted for brighter dreams. We rode past dusty, empty patches, buildings with blowout windows, and faded shipping containers rusted into the ground. In lieu of people, the rust had taken over. We drove around. We saw a small huddle of sweaty, middle-aged men in wife-beaters in front of a tire store, watching two guys slash at each other and the air with their pocketknives. A shirtless child roared by on a 4x4. He popped a wheelie and jabbed a victorious fist into the air. The engine screamed as he pulled off. In the distance, he went towards what looked like a cookout. Four men dressed in red head-to-toe leaned on a Fuchsia caddy on rims and stared at us as we passed.

“What the fuck happened here?” I said.

“I have no idea,” my companion said, slowing the car down so we could take it all in.

When we leave people or places, we often imagine that those left behind stay frozen in the amber of our nostalgia and absence. Arna Bontemps would write of these people: “Old people too tired to move, young ones who enjoyed a favor or two in the South, and others who were just plain scared to leave, stay.” In my mind, Alexandria would be the place where I would find those people by sitting at the Five and Dime’s linoleum Automat counter and ordering a Shirley Temple. I would try to explain who my family was and where they lived to the ancient waitress in white shoes, until she was struck by a bolt of phosphorescent recognition and remembered them all and what they liked to order when they came in. I imagined I would find neighbors who would invite us in for a soda and awkwardly show us pictures of them all as children. None of this happened. When we found Lowerline, there were no fig trees, or polished Buicks, or girls in penny loafers. It was now a rundown street, crammed with doublewide trailers

“How do you think anybody lived? We weren’t rich. Nobody was. If it was bad, I don’t remember. If it was beautiful, I forget that, too. All I remember is wanting to leave, and I did.”
resting on Astroturf mats next to old wooden cottages. 205 Lowerline itself was a grassy place where tough dudes parked cars they hoped to fix up but obviously never got around to. It was remarkable in no way except that it caused everyone in my family a lot of grief. “This is it?” I said to him, my fiancé, as he stood firm beside me, aware that people were eyeing us up and did not seem friendly. One of them, a dark woman in a white pair of Spandex biker shorts and a tight tank top, called out to us, “Who y’all?” I waved, adopting an easy voice I had heard my mother use with people, “How you? Do you know The Arsans?” I said, crossing the street. “Well, I’m Johnnie Marie Arsan’s granddaughter, and we are here to see about the place.”

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WALTER BENJAMIN ONCE wrote of the Angel of History: “His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and
hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so, to awaken
the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is
blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong
that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly
into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before
him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is this storm.”

As I talk to the woman in Spandex, I think about Benjamin’s storm and
I think about those migrants who, like my own mother, were angels of his-
}
Waiting Boats. Photograph.
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Yes. What is the point of coming back now? It is a question I once considered as a child when I returned to Ghana, my father’s homeland, for a summer-long visit. Once there, my cousins bent to my demands and, with great disinterest, took me to visit Elmina castle. As they laughed and played on the cannons and heckled the well-built fisherman, I took the tour alone, with a cheerful, intelligent guide, who, despite it being his lunch break, explained what had happened in each room, and concluded the tour with me peering out onto the blue water from an impossible, small slit. This, the tour guide informed me between bites of his sandwich, was the “door of no return.” This, he told me, was the last time those Africans would see their continent, ever. As I listened to my cousins laughing outside, it wasn’t lost on me that to them I was the product of those who walked through the door and they were the product of those who never saw it. They could empathize and intellectualize the passage and understand my belief that we were branches of the same tree, but as they often explained to me, there was much water between our ways. Perhaps it is because of those conversations that I see blackness in America as rooted to Africa but also to rupture. That same “break” gives way to the blues, to be-bop, to jazz, to hip-hop. It is the ability to create solely from the self, but it is also the vulnerability of not having that self preserved or recorded. Much of the history of black folks is intimate, disjointed, and full of questions: how did we get here? Where does this all come from? Mine is no exception.

Earlier, my aunts made me promise that I would go across to Pineville and try to find my great-grandparents’ graves. I told them I would do my best, but had no desire or plans to go through with it. Pineville is not far from where Jerry Lee Lewis was born. It is where my grandfather was born and raised on a farm in the woods, but after being attacked on a bridge by a white man, he left. And now, Pineville is where many of Alexandria’s white residents have fled.

With some time to kill, we decided at the last minute to go. We drove out of Alexandria, past its rundown streets and the billboards that warned about the hazards of crystal meth. Pineville is just over a bridge, but it is a world apart. It is manicured and modern with big box stores and suburban tract housing. My aunts gave us very bad directions, and it was very hot out. We pulled into a strip mall and checked the map. The neighborhood was very residential, and very white—I decided that it didn’t seem like a black cemetery would be nearby. So we got back on the highway until we
saw a flat, green expanse spotted with bright limestone headstones. We exited. In a small hut near the entrance, there was a caretaker. No, he had never heard of that cemetery but this one was not it, we needed to head back. “That street doesn’t even exist out here, seems like you had it right the first time.” We turned and reversed course until we found the street and drove to its dead end, where, to our left, a thin teenaged boy ran through the grass with a large trash bag. He smiled, we smiled back. We parked the car. The air, heavy and warm, felt like a smothering hand. The graveyard was small and tucked away. Weeds grew high and gnats cluttered the air. We walked through a metal fence with a gate that hung off of its hinges. Even from a distance, we could see that whole plots were sunken in. The older headstones were chipped, cracked, or sometimes half submerged under muddy water. Names were scratched roughly into bricks of cement, in block letters. Dogs, or some other creatures, had done their business with abandon. Once it was a graveyard, but what we saw was a ruin.

I wondered as we stood in the graveyard if my companion could understand this, with all of his books about his grandfather and his family’s many pictures from the nineteenth century in Ukraine. If he could understand these toppled headstones, small monuments left to fall, and if he asked would I be able to explain, did I even have the answer? But he didn’t ask. He asked if we know what area they are buried in. No, I told him. I was sharp because I was angry about the distance between our stories, and I was ashamed to have to show someone how much we suffered here. He squinted from the glare of the sun. “Then we will look,” he said. “You take that side. I’ll go here.” The thin boy cut across the edge of the graveyard again—his bag was empty. A few feet behind him there was a small mound of trash next to overflowing trash dumpsters. He waved goodbye. Neither of us said anything about that either, because it was quite clear, that, yes, this is where they dump their trash.

We looked for two hours. I found the graves of people who were enslaved until their twenties but died free, living long enough to see the start of the twentieth century. I realized that my grandmother must have known people who had been enslaved, and that those people knew what it meant to be owned by another human being, and later found a way to believe in God, in music, in laughter. I felt the proximity of what I before called history. I touched their names. I placed stones and bundles of buttercups and black-eyed Susans on their graves. I prayed for them. Here was a baby placed beside her mother. A husband next to his wife. Sisters. A son who insisted on being buried in that mud only a few years ago, so he could be with his kin. Some of the headstones had pictures encased in glass on them. In one, a tall man in a black suit stands next to a piano, below him, a quote from the book of Samuel: “Therefore, will I play before the Lord.” I said their names aloud. I wiped dirt from their engravings. I apologized for failing. I thanked them for surviving. I realized what was done was done, but here in the now, I had someone beside
me to help me search the mud. I called my mother while standing in the high grass, alive with chirping, wild with flowers and damp with sweat, and asked her to tell me what was on the headstone of my great-grandmother. It took a second for her to remember but then she told me: *it says her name and then mother of daughter and granddaughters.*