

# All Things Go on Past

THE  
SLAVE'S FRIEND.

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EMMA.

Emma was the little girl whose Papa once asked her, what made every body love her. She replied, you remember,

## **Caroline Remembers Her First Mistress, Darla Ford**

When I think on it, it is of joy I recall. And knowing not. Not yet. *Ain't I got a pretty little crop of niggers coming on? Do my little niggers want some bread to gnaw on?* Small being what it was, our minds were full of maybes and the bread was good. White folk talk. Black folk quiet. Green leaves turn to gold then back to dirt like most things done gone by. Once the missus sliced my palm, *she said just to make sure your blood was red.* She cut and cut a line then dulled the embers snaking, now held my hand in mud. I could say things changed, everything was dark after that, after knowing she would cut me like a calf. I grew inward like a nail.

## **Tobias Finch Tells How He Raped His 11- Year-Old Slave, Clea**

That girl lived in herself quiet as an instrument keeps music. How bold her stillness, her ability to remain righteous as a torn daisy no matter how I grabbed at her roots. I meant to unravel her justice, find her private place. Learn her. A slave to study. But, she was a green fruit in my mouth. A spiteful thing. How daring her silence, as if she could hide. Who could have guessed she would not flinch or beg, her eyes a trained voice, moving about like a calf. The nimble slide of her neck. Her hands small and crooked as walnut shells. How she seemed like my own child. How outrageous that she would remind me. Her naked figure nothing to me but a black stain on my clean, white sheet.

## **Zebedee Ponders What It's Like To Be Sold**

When they tip my head back to look at my teeth  
I see—

the mouth of the iron bell  
wider, wider than an iron pot.  
Its tongue a black fist that makes music  
though its song is always the same.

# Living And Dying: Clea's Reincarnation

Been born five times, four times black. Progress of me unsteady as a sparrow  
branch-gripped in wind.

That slave time, I don't want to hear no tell. Of chains and sea trips. My  
missing finger. Longed for comfort to come like Jesus in the cool of the day,  
but there always was locusts.

My eye got shot in a war. A glass one I had, plopped it in an old jam jar that  
watched me when I woke.

Pretenses I had. One life spoke Creole. Wore a whiskery white suit.

Once, a saint; my soul clung to God the way an egg grips its separate parts.

Born White one time. With hands full of mathematics. My lover was numbers.  
Can't say any of the bodies I had for hundreds of years was finer.

Each life walks parallel streets at the same pace. I am dead in each. Time is  
the devil, but I ain't saying he's fast. All my rooms are quiet like the dark  
after fire.

All things go on past. Jesus be with me to the end. To die and live outside my  
mind without a mirror. Show me roots below the hours. The heart in its jerky  
box. Driving rain holds the answer. Go on and be glad I think I'll be.

Gather up my thoughts, scatter like wasps. In my hand, a broken bowl.

## Edwin Stanton's Aside To His Wife

I'm having a wedding dress made for your burial. I have chosen the silk. It is  
soft as melon. No corset nor buttons. Just a sash to buckle you in. A fistful  
of geraniums to fade with. There is husbandry in these last measures. I'll  
speak with the seamstress. Tell her to risk gossip at the wake: embroider the  
bodice with Christ's crown, for now you're his bride. But no coming Easter, nor  
season will soften these gestures. (Be quiet now old self, go dark. Soon she'll  
belong to the ground).

## Lincoln Among the Peacocks

A cluster of them. A tumult of rigorously hued feathers caught in knots bound  
them to their tethers. Who thought to leash these birds? Why twine such legs to  
trees? To keep the orthodoxy of man and animal would Lincoln have thought? If  
he were me. I'd like to be boxed in that skin for a day, that hour in the  
garden with the peacocks. Lean as tooth root and just as white with my beard

skin-stitched. Just try to pluck it. I'd plant my feet on the lawn and grab blue necks. Hold them tight. Cut them loose easy as crushing glass in my fist. All the while aware of my body in his body, my hand in his hand. In black suit I'd be ornament among the feathered gowns now trailing free of hindrance. Forget Lincoln, I'd be a peacock. My coverts would dazzle. My headdress a torch song. The rigor of my gait untarnished by him who held me by the throat.

When I began conducting research for this project, I found many of the slave narratives I read, and the interviews I listened to, frightening. One that I will never forget was a recorded interview of a former kitchen slave who could not speak but sang all of her answers to the interviewer's questions; she sang bits of old spirituals, and she never once answered a question directly.

I was most interested in the strong ideas slaves held about proper burial. Many believed that if you were not buried, you were forced to stay amongst the living in some way. You could not enter into any kind of restful afterlife if you remained unburied and did not have a funeral. In some ways, this isn't so different from our own culture: American funerals today are often about telling stories about the dead as a way of honoring them, of remembering their good parts and quirks. I thought that if I wrote about a group of slaves, it would be a way of honoring them, of honoring their lives, however dismal. My characters were not to be buried correctly by fellow slaves; they were to be "buried" or "sent off" by me, in poems.

I continued to research about slavery and then stopped after a while because what I discovered as I read deeper and deeper into the history of slavery was simply unbearable. I began to look at everyone I passed on the street, imagining us as we might have been during slavery: that person would be a master, that person would be a slave; who would I be as a light-skinned "mulatto"? Those kinds of questions began to trouble me a great deal. I started to really distrust white people, for example, an especially bothersome feeling as I am half white. To continue writing, I had to stop researching. I felt I knew enough about what had happened during the history of slavery for my poems to continue to come from an authentic place.

I had wanted to ask my father about his great-grandmother, a former slave. When I was a child, the only thing my father ever said about her was that she was very violent, very mean. My mother advised me against asking about my great-great-grandmother—and I heeded her advice. About a week later, I had a dream in which a group of slaves was standing at my kitchen window, looking in. I felt certain that those dream slaves were real, and they were asking me, however silently, to write about them so that they could have their peace and rest. I also felt certain that the slaves I was writing about were somehow related to me, and that I would discover my ancestors by writing about them. I trusted these people would come to me via writing the poems, and they did. I determined that as someone who is half African American, I hold the experience of slavery

somewhere in my unconscious mind. I also decided that if I focused only on writing about it, my hand would unearth whatever was hidden in my internal historical memory. Sometimes, I think I was Clea, the main voice that arose in this project, that I am just a continuation of her life, and that I wrote her story from personal experience, a personal experience that was uncovered by my difficult foray into research about slavery.