

LULU'S PLEASURE PALACE

Cherry Muhanji

The first time she climbed into Mary Catherine's big bed and up against that mammoth woman, Lulu's monthly moons had been part of her life for three years; still she was grabbed by both ears and tossed out. The same thing the next time and the next. The third time wasn't the charm but the fourth. Mary Catherine was lying on her back, nude, arms akimbo, when Lulu crawled on top. It was summer in N'Orleans, and though an apt pupil, little Lulu was still in training (more on that later). Both, though, slept nude. She snuggled up between the big breasts of Mary Catherine and waited. When nothing happened, she began to suckle. She drifted back to that little girl that took the hand of M'Dear on their way to church.

Mary Catherine lifted her face from her breast and said, "I'm not your Momma, Lulu. Learn the difference between giving pleasure, like to a john, and receiving it from a woman. Let's talk."

Lulu, anxious not to be thrown out of Mary Catherine's bed again, began to hurriedly explain her conversion to Catholicism: "When the parish priest placed my hand on the bulge in his cassock, that's when I asked myself, if I could do that what else couldn't I do? I converted to Mother Mary immediately."

Mary Catherine did the sign of the cross and gave a soft sleepy laugh as she stroked the neck and shoulders of little Lulu. "Did you ever want to be a Madame?"

"Not really," little Lulu whispered, her breath hot against Mary Catherine's proud stomach.

"It seems you are a great student . . . though I wonder about that little girl," Mary Catherine laughed, lifting Lulu's face up by her very large hands.

"It's all business, right?" Little Lulu asked as a tall blue question mark formed between them.

"One woman's pretty much like another. . . . Now an ass? That's something entirely different," Mary Catherine mused, as if Lulu had

asked her a question about one. "Pussy is pretty much the same," she continued, as she began with some effort to move Lulu from on top.

"Not yet," Lulu whispered, "there's this feeling. . . ."

Mary Catherine realized that little Lulu, who all agreed was an apt pupil, had been carefully coming. She placed a curious hand across Lulu's bush and fingered in. Little Lulu climaxed, immediately.

"A great ass . . . can get you into doing things you might not, but not what you just did. But really . . . it's different and all the same," Mary Catherine continued, as she lifted the young girl up, rubbed her broad nose between the faces of little Lulu's tiny erecting nipples, and inhaled deeply.

"Then what's different for you?" Lulu snapped, mindful that that feeling—something she'd never got from the in-house exercises—was rising yet again.

Mary Catherine smiled. "You're still little, Lulu. What were you expecting, crawling up into my bed? Looking for candy in a sweet shop?"

Lulu felt the candy sweet fingers between her already wet thighs stop at the lip of her bush, and as she rode those fingers her body broke into spasms, her nose running, even as her thighs seem to be, her mind shattering, heart pounding, voice breaking, wiping her nose on the corner of the silk sheet: "This . . . is . . . what . . . then?"

Mary Catherine grimaced, but said nothing, excited little Lulu chattering away in nonsensical sounds then offered very clearly, "I'll do you."

"Then what would you have me do?" Mary Catherine queried as the tall blue question mark that was in the room suddenly blazed red.

Little Lulu, still on top, shimmied down the large woman, and as she did she realized that she could feel at first a quiver and then a pulse hammering away. Mary Catherine's? "What if I just stopped?"

"I'd flick you off, little girl."

"I don't think so." Lulu shook her head, no. "No, I don't think so."

"Now, look where your mouth is. Now, little girl, blow."

The massive bed rocked. They reached the Third Heaven. Count them!

One!

Two!

and Three!

The saints, who guard against that sort of thing, were rattled. . . .

Mary Catherine was all asleep, dreaming of the tall blue question mark chasing her. Lulu went to her room, picked up her coronet, mouthing the funnel end hungrily. Pumping hot licks of jazz into the air before whispering soft hellos into the night sky.

. . . somebody is singing. . . .

Jazz grew out of N'Orleans. Legendary whores headlined in Storyville. When the clock turned from 1897 to 1900, they were in full swing. It was devil music. Whatever dark sun or luminous moon guided that music I won't speak on, but it got the johns ready for what they came for. Nobody remembers when horn playing, banjo strumming, coronet blowing, and flute twilling . . . that whores played that music like nobody's business. Antonia Gonzales played a mean upfront and in-your-face coronet. Though not where I played the bones, tambourine, drum. Later everything. . . .

Storyville: the red light district where, from 1897-1917, soldier, sailor, syphilis, and sin satiated Basin and Perdido streets in the French Quarter. It was snuffed out by the Department of the Army in a burst of evangelical zeal that proclaimed it illegal to operate a bordello within ten miles of an army base. That sent pickpockets, pimps, prostitutes, conmen, coronet players, and the best musicians exiting town, constrained by Lake Pontchartrain and the Gulf. That left only one way to go—up the Mississippi, scattering dirty music everywhere. (Elvis heard it in the Delta and Bix Beiderbecke heard it in Davenport, Iowa. The music

seduced the latter—an alcoholic, dead at twenty eight. Elvis, the former, would live longer, but not wiser—a teetotaler hooked on prescription drugs. He heard the music coming out of the black church as gospel. Too poor to be anywhere else, he lived with railroad tracks on one side and the black church on the other.)

The music: where stomps, snorts, growls, and guttural umps came right out of Congo Square and brought inside where hips, thighs, and the mishmash of coupling bodies met in brothels, juke joints, and where Holy Rollers rolled and shouted unto the lord. Later played at by constrained male Creoles, and later still, wayward white boys.

Beelzebub forced a whole lot of people into quaking, shaking, and taking his music into the streets. So confused were the Quality wives that they teamed up with the evangelical hot heads. Both convinced that the lowdown sound caused good men to go bad. The evidence was clear: nasty women and demon rum drove men out of their happy homes, and wrecked families. God closed Storyville. Amen.

Gone forever was the greatest collection of whores east or west of the Mississippi. The packing up of the good silver, the better candelabras, and the best long-stem glasses could be heard all over the Crescent City. The sheriff, his deputy, and the best rear admiral of the U. S. Fleet lamented their leaving. "Times they were a changing."

When Storyville was and N'Orleans was and times were before 1917, Lulu never felt the chill in the air that dampened the upstairs, the downstairs, and labored inside the parlor. Now she felt defeated. Separated. Alone. They weren't going to New York City to enjoy blackface minstrels. They were going to Detroit to "entertain" factory blacks, illiterate workers, former sons of slaves with rough hands, bad manners, and bad breath, but who had swollen yellow pay envelopes. To avoid that thought, Lulu gave herself over to the blood rush of memory. The Palace had closed in April, when all along everybody said, *a thing like that just couldn't happen.*

He came in. A Haitian. Black as tar. He was lovely. Perfect in manner. Perfect in body. An Afro Francophone, heir to one of the families that had taken Haiti from Napoleon, and who, despite the victory, had become as French as any Frenchman at home or abroad. He'd been to the French court, preferred French food, French wine, and French women. The curious red flame flickering in the night air (Mary Catherine advised that a red one be installed on the outside) was what drew him in. "Like a moth," he laughingly said, out from a mouth with the whitest of teeth framed against a dark sea of blackness that sent a shiver of expectation throughout the house, and even the girls, when he walked in.

Mary Catherine guessed, as she took his gloves, cane, and cape, that in his eyes he found Lulu's Pleasure Palace garish, gaudy, and overstated. No doubt these untutored efforts were in his mind curious. (*How do these Americans with such poor taste manage to ignite such interest from other cultures that were older and certainly more imaginative?*) Yet, here he was a stranger in a strange land.

In spite of herself, Mary Catherine's eyes lingered on the tumble of white ruffle that emerged from beneath the edge of his embroidered coat sleeve. And as he lifted the glass of champagne from her tray with the ease of the accustomed, the ruffle obeyed, never for a moment getting in his way. Did he in that moment direct an unasked question at her? If so, she dodged it, and with downward eyes excused herself. Lulu, at the time, hadn't completed Madame's training. She had not reached her potential, and Toussaint had a dismissive air. This was her maiden voyage. Not his. He found himself awkwardly floundering toward some undetermined end. He was bored, cynical, and lacked any nuance in his view of the world. He had a chilly intelligence born out of a need to prove his worth by denouncing everything and everyone outside of the French court as beneath him. Both, though, would soon feel the current between them, but little else. Neither understood what the blood of opposites might produce—an ecstatic buzz, or nothing at all.

Toussaint looked over the ascending color of woman cream—hi-cream—going down the line. He suddenly snapped his wrist, and turning from them, toward the imitative Greek statues, heaved a sigh.

The black Frenchman, née Haitian, sat for a time and listened, but not intently, to music that was as different as anything he'd heard in this crude city. It was jagged, and at war with any melody he knew. He wasn't impressed. He might have been—if the ruffled sleeves, the snuff in his vest pocket, and the fitted waist coat weren't contributing to his inability to extract much from these barbarous imitators who had might, but clearly no taste. If he were less adorned, he might have heard the music and seen the sparks of lightning all around that triggered an innate strength to fight again this peculiar institution where the color of one's skin made one inferior. And that this primitive music made by savages discharged the muskets, brandished the swords, and wielded the knives that gave his ancestors victory. He knew all about the battle, but not what really guided every man, woman, and child to do the impossible. Defeat the French. He paid little attention to this fabled city that was filled with full-blooded Indians, free people of color who were never slaves, the Irish, Spanish, Chinese, and Negro descendants who had been captured under the Fugitive Slave Law and returned to their owners, or sold on the auction block the same day as shiploads of Africans arrived. Also in the mix were women who played this new music and brought a magic into the brothels that fired the beginning of an age for unmarried women.

This city took them all in. It condensed. It preserved. It devoured. That's what he couldn't hear in the music where the best of it was played in bordellos. He was Haitian, and he was black, and this was Storyville, and so far he hadn't been premature in his evaluation of the evening, until . . . until the dazzling one-drop, red-haired Lulu sauntered into the room where he sat erect—stone stiff.

The red in her dress startled, her skin taunted, the feathered fan amused, but it was the fire-engine hair that devoured. For the

first time he felt hungry for a woman like this. She was round much like the women he knew at home, though he hurried to edge her roundness with a certain chin, a sharper nose, smaller breasts, in a need to fashion her after the women who were thought to be off limits at the French court. She was holding an ostrich-feathered fan with the diamond clip clasped firmly in elbow-length, white-fingered gloves. Immediately Lulu's whiteness into his darkness fell. In her plunge she was unaware of the place where few go and certainly where no Madame ever does. Caught in this simmering expectation, her plum-red dress, hair, and fan meant absolutely nothing as she descended into him. The black Frenchman, née Haitian, leaned into the ear of his valet and whispered, "Find me a flower—you know of which I speak—if you have to hunt this entire city for it."

And he kept putting up one finger.

The room, the music, the wink, the nod, and finally the chat of promises always audible in a bordello, silenced. The drone of that silence heightened, and left her nerve-naked and him fixated on the curve of her shoulder, long bone annexing long bone, that caused the fixed eye to drift, descend toward her breasts that his mind was already mouthing. Neither, if asked, could remember how they were both suddenly alone in her boudoir. He ran his fingers through her flaming hair gently, then pulled. Lulu slapped his hand away. He didn't speak English and she pretended not to understand any of his French. They sat for a long moment, each struggling not to forecast their next move. He was on fire. He had always been made to wait in secreted boudoirs at the French court, but it was never like this.

She was there to serve. Her move. She guided his hand into her inner thigh. His fingertips felt surprise. Baffled. The heat from her body matched his own. And as he found his way toward her secreted red plume, she opened. He looked in. It was the same. "The color!" he cried. He buried his tears, lips, and tongue into her flame, uttering, "C'est magnifique." *Love is here*, he thought,

his mind tilted toward a forest of sugar cane—no, a forest of connecting candy canes. He licked. And love entered her anus, then up, up into the cave of her armpit where the red, red, hair bristled—and finally down into her deep red well. The journey ecstatic.

By morning the door to the boudoir remained locked. Yvette, the second cook, complained that she couldn't serve them breakfast. Mary Catherine was summoned with keys jingling. Lulu and the Haitian were gone. The certain flower left on the rumpled bed.

Lulu returned after three days.

. . . somebody is singing. . . .

Mary Catherine in Paris & in Love

Mary Catherine rushed from the romp of the Music Hall where the curtain had come down and so had the skirts of the unbloomered asses at the end of the Can-Can. She arrived just in time to revel in the giddy laughter of Carrottop-with-the-reddest-of-hair-ever, a new arrival to the City of Lights who was—to her delight—blushing from across the table.

They were an odd pair, the new arrival with the reddest-of-hair-ever and Mary Catherine, a giant of a woman billed at the Music Hall as the “Mammoth Black Devil with the Voice of an Angel.”

They dined on smoked salmon, *salade Niçoise*, and single-malt whiskey. After dinner Mary Catherine curled up and offered Carrottop her forefinger dipped in red wine; and she took it into her mouth! The thinking being *that her finger dipped in red, red, wine would somehow compliment the color of her hair*. Love was all over each. In Carrottop's hair, ears, along her throat, and resting uneasily on her cheeks. On Mary Catherine's lips and in her braille fingers—that spelled Love. The one-drop, Creole-skinned, blushing “boy” and the black devil with the voice of an angel ordered strong

black fragrant coffee, both laughing at nothing and everything. When Mary Catherine up and spilled coffee all over the white linen tablecloth tumbling over the thick heavy cream, then frantically wrapped the tip of her forefinger in a napkin and plunged it into a crystal goblet of iced water to erase the coffee stains, it was the funniest scene ever. Here was the Star of the Music Hall cleaning the table, and the blushing boy was still blushing.

Of course, they struggled as the young do. Like Carrottop's patois, the bastard French she spoke, Mary Catherine said, while Carrottop vilified the proper French Mary Catherine spoke, remembering the whacks to the knuckles from the nuns when she mispronounced a word. They cried as often as they laughed, especially as both knew that they would not remain The Two on this road. Each knew that the other had growing pains, and each moved to give the other room.

Each had dipped into the other's life and drawn up difference, difference that made no difference. For Mary Catherine the deep and perplexing well of Carrottop's refusal to be touched some nights; Carrottop's laughter and awe at Mary Catherine's diligence in fashioning a dildo out of wood and leather just so she might have an orgasm; Carrottop's preponderance of skin color; Sherman's March through the South; lynching, and incest was for Mary Catherine more like a dime novel turned brutal. For Carrottop, Mary Catherine's life in Paris read like a Renaissance romance. Both needed answers as the young do, but not knowing the questions to ask.

"I'm not experiencing you. . . . You want to open a brothel in New Orleans?"

"All a brothel is, is illusion. Lulu fits," Carrottop explained. "I'll pay you back every single dime. . . . My mother's still there and Lulu. . . . Creole women are favored."

"Wait . . . too many things going on here. You can't be asking me for money so early in a relationship we've never really had. . . . A brothel? Lulu? Who is? Your mother? Creoles? Is that what you are?"

"I know that I look like a boy."

"Is that what's bothering you? I'm charmed, I think. . . ." The boy said nothing. "Am I interested in a brothel? Not interested. . . . My family are descendants of Elizabeth Freeman, the first enslaved Negro to be freed under the new state constitution of Massachusetts."

"I know."

"We trace back to the Revolutionary War, but left soon after."

"For Paris, I know. . . ."

"Paris worked."

"I know. A family of show people. Entertainers in the Folies Bergères. Your uncle a . . . famous dancer. Your voice . . . you got from that long family line. . . . I've done my homework."

"Did we meet? Of course not . . . I would have experienced you."

Love adorned The Two. Paris enables lovers. And Love always made the coffee spill anew, the rich cream flooding the table, the crystal goblet filled with ice water, Mary Catherine's magical hands and Carrotopp's blushing boy's laughter, returned. Everyone and everything else vanished.

. . . somebody is singing. . . .

Kitty Rose

Before Kitty Rose arrived at the door of Lulu's Pleasure Palace, she'd heard the rumors, and like everybody else she didn't believe any of them. During the end of that short war with Spain and the annexing of Cuba, the lead up to "The War to End All Wars" was unthinkable. What was thinkable was advertised in the Blue Book, with which every cabbie, newspaper boy, carriage driver, and father with sons who'd reached puberty were handed the latest news on every whore house in Storyville. "Come One Come All. Lulu's Pleasure Place, where the crème de la crème of the Creoles play." Girls with porcelain skin, ringlets of hair, nose unpinched by

clothespins, luscious lips, and, of course, big hips—a winning ticket for any man desiring a girl with a big heart and pink-tipped tits.

The Madame, not for profit but boredom, decided to introduce Kitty Rose as Cinderella. Well . . . more like a peek-a-boo Cinderella who gets trapped in a life of ill repute. The Madame (a devoted fan of Thomas Edison's new flickers) soon staged "The Perils of Pauline," a heart-break story with a better ending than beginning. The stage was set: A clock strikes midnight, a skirt gathered up, quickly, a girl on the run. A gold tiara—tittering. A coach—orange—poof, into a pumpkin. A glass slipper—lost. The finale? The prince beats the villain through swift and magical sword play. Cinderella is then carried away in his arms to his kingdom (in this case from the bottom to the top of the ascending staircase). The johns loved it! The trouble was that Kitty Rose missed the irony of Cinderella staged in a whore house; the story always made her cry.

. . . Somebody is singing. . . .

"It's not about a prince. See? It's the girls against boys. Got that? Your attitude's rank." So charged Merryanne, the Albino Root woman, prophet, and sometimes-blind poet. A new hire, because the Madame was superstitious.

"Me? Rank? Shittt! I ain't poppin' no pussies like you," our Rose replied, the pink of her tongue nudging the words out, unconscious of the shock and shape they made exiting from such a pretty mouth.

"I got the Madame. What you got?" Merryanne asked, her blue irises slowly rising, disappearing under half moon eyebrows, her eyelids still open. "Don't try that boogie-man shit on me. Put your eyes back in your head, girl!"

"Scaredee cat."

Our Rose sat silently, furiously buffing her perfect red nails that matched the color of her red, red lips that nestled nicely in her perfect, princess face.

"You better be scared."

"Of?"

"You got a Kitty Rose world swimming around in your head, and you got this thing for anything that's dead, dyin', cheatin', and lyin', especially broke-ass, dirty Toms. I can guarantee no prince is coming out of that."

"He'll come. You watch. He'll be golden, too. Got a carriage; well—naw, a fine motor car like the picture in the paper. Like Mr. Ford's got. And clothes and . . . and people makin' up to him. He'll be the fa-vo-rite son of the king and . . . and, well, The Duke of A-ra-be-a."

"Arabia, huh? Do you know where—?"

"Like the times some came in . . . I was mainly workin' with Teddy Rose'velt's Rough Riders. They thought I was San Juan Hill . . . like ridin' up on me any ol' kinda way. That's when I decided on a prince."

"They'd come in—Princes, right? Would come in. . . ."

"In Cuba the prince of this, duke of that came in a—"

"With Roosevelt, right?"

"Don't be dumb, girl. They didn't come in on the same night. . . . I got a schedule. . . . You'd think johns'll slow down 'cause of the weather. Most liked the new music, ya know . . . and can they dance!"

"Who? The Rough Riders?"

"For a prophet your ass is pretty dumb. Did ya know that?"

"Kitty, do you?"

Howling with laughter, she asked, "What you mean? Lulu's pussy-with-a-whip."

When a mouth like that talks like that—it's hard, don't you think? Not like nobody talked like that. Well . . . some did and some didn't, but from a red, red, mouth like that? Perfect.

"Least I got Lulu White. And you got what? Your prince, right?"

Who could resist poetry like that? When our Rose laughed, so did our world. Then snap! Blue as blue can be. Like that. Funny confused her. She'd be left standing, perplexed long after the punch line. (That's what got Alsee's attention.) Catnip is what he

called her from the very beginning. She wasn't exactly like the Peaches, and for sure not like the "Ne'ber Beens" who howled, and scratched themselves, laughing all the while at something she said or asked, making nasty with their mouths, their dresses way above the ankle. Catnip would just be left—staring. Then the first hint that Catnip's "got it" was when her perfect mouth opened, erupting with laughter. Ah, shame on the eyes that couldn't see how her neck sat on just right shoulders but never quite ready for the laughter starting in her belly to come tunneling through. Then and only then would she let herself go—but when she got the joke, her laughter rose like bunches of bright ribbons tumbling in the air. Then she'd let herself go—her body unwrapping like colorful threads—while her hands repeatedly slapped her knee. Everyone by then would be caught up in Kitty Rose, jingling, "Cinderella's where's your fella? Cinderella where's your fellah?"

From that day till this, just to hear her laugh, or remember "Cinderella where's your fellah? Cinderella where's your fellah?" every time they passed her in the hall after turning tricks, especially with dirty Toms. . . .

. . . she'd be singing. . . .

Imagine the surprise when our Rose, fast becoming "The Cinderella at Lulu's," seriously went outside, stuck her left forefinger in her mouth—"testing the wind," she said—then softly whispered, "Sophia's coming. I want all ya pussies to meet her."

Sophia

The "she" arrived carrying a carpeted valise, a bright yellow parasol, and a square tin box tucked under her arm that read, "Biscuits," in gold lettering. At once opposite energies swirled around her, one in slow motion—allowing time for all to take her in—the other in real time. As she slowly removed her jacket (black) and looked around for where to lay it, Kitty Rose in real

time rushed to help. Finding nothing to hang it on, she lay it on the banister's edge leading up the ascending stairs. She wore a high-necked blouse (white), with a teenie-weenie black ribbon at the throat and a black skirt that edged the floor. (Were those thick-heeled, go-to-work shoes?) Everything about her added to the complexity of the moment. She registered dimensionally and flooded the mind. Young? Yes. That part would please Miss Lulu White. Full hips? Yes. Fuller lips—yes, yes, and yes. More to please Lulu. Clothes? No. Hair? No. Hat. No. The one that sat on her head was like a bird's nest. Intelligent? Unnecessary. She was a black skin beauty where red eddies beneath her skin spun, making her cherry chocolate. She turned toward her hanging jacket for a long moment, over at the ascending stairs, and up at the chandelier with a thousand lights, and then toward Kitty Rose. From that black-cherry skin and white, white teeth, and a mouth that spilled cherries when it spoke droplets of blood. Then she smiled and said, "Momma, so this is where you work."

It's all because of the Madame's excess. You can't blame the one standing under the crystal droplet chandelier for igniting poetic imaginings, harmful inquiries, strange rhythms. Who ever thought a black beauty conceived and consumed in darkness would or could show up like this in a brothel?

Alsee

No matter the size, shape, or closeness and how often crème colored tits and asses were daily paraded in front of him, Alsee's job was to hold impotent johns and their over anxious sons through magic tricks, song, dance steps, and jokes meant to get the old ready for high-stakes poker downstairs, and get the young pumped for first-time pussy upstairs.

it was a job better he supposed than most. . . .

(Remember that jumpy clip, the Negro in silent film who sang and danced through the war?) Daddy. Over there he became the celebrated darkie billed as The Best Natural Coon meant to lift

your spirits, with plantation melodies through song and dance who was discovered by the Colored James Reese Europe who introduced Jazz to the French. Unlike my father, Lieutenant James Reese Europe was a soldier's soldier forbidden to carry a rifle in America, but not in France. (Later he earned his stripes by holding off enemy soldiers in France.)

James Reese Europe dreamed dreams too.

When I knew him, his stories were “verbal jujitsu,” as his moods were. One minute he'd snap into action. The next? He'd pause—as if to look back over what he'd just said—and in a slow meditative turn the tall tale would spin from “Brer Rabbit” into “black bodies swaying in the southern breeze strange fruit hanging from the Poplar trees.”

Like the Rouge flowing into the Detroit River, I flow into and out of my father's stories. His name was Alsee and he married (a big leg girl) my mother, Annie. He was out of N'Orleans (he later said, but family said Shreveport) and she from North Carolina. They settled, or she unsettled, in Detroit, where I was born. I struggle to make sense of the man who missed the legendary gold watch that Henry Ford gave but was forced to retire a few months before completing his thirty-year hitch. I think of them, and the city of Detroit

Getting Ready for WORLD WAR 1 (in New Orleans)

My father didn't simply disappear into the war. That came later. First, he went foraging among the fabled Creole women of New Orleans before depositing himself into “The War to End All Wars.” They could nip the skin from a peach in tiny tears, it was rumored, *all the while slurping their tongue through the meat of said peach, never losing their smile.*

Spin that around in your head for a moment.

The story goes that he left New Orleans in a big hurry. Seems he killed . . . let me stop right there. There is always a story about some Negro—riding the rails, stepping up, or hiding in the back of a wagon, taking the back seat in a bus, on a horse, walking; in short, leaving the South by any means possible. Why? Stories go something like this: he'd either killed, or almost, an unnamed cracker, or refused to share his share of share cropping, or looked up instead of down at a white woman. I got the story my father killed a woman over another woman.

Those women with the peach-stained teeth always lay robustly in the south corner of my mind, and daddy's. He must, as I know I would have, strained to see if they were real. They are a continual song to me inside my head.

At first Daddy must have thought he'd died and gone to heaven when he was allowed to work at Lulu's. He was more familiar with the deep Delta blues than what he heard at Lulu's. Like Ragtime. He swears he heard Stride piano there. He later said he took what the blues do for the soul and danced them real slow and steady like the slow sopping of biscuits through syrup on Sunday mornings—his own style, he said, that made the johns like dogs in heat. All this happened before the driver of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary took a wrong turn June 28th, 1914, and ran into a waiting gun. Bam! World War 1.

He expected, as I imagine, the floating French of the Peaches tonguing the bell of his ear way superior than any thing that had come his way. Daddy dreams. And that's my gift. He understands, as I do, the absolute need for the melancholy sound of a smoldering guitar as it ripens into melody. Daddy and me are like clouds in the sky—making up our own pictures like children with crayons do. Or mystics when they speak on god. Before the Brother against Brother War, the Creole beauties were manna from heaven to starving colored boys. Layer upon layer of legends, women

groomed from infancy to be the “wives” of rich white planters, leaving every country boy “strung out.”

After the Civil War who was and was not Creole blurred. At Lulu’s those christened Creole pussies directed his hands on how to tie red ribbons in the hair of their victorious “V”s, lace a corset, or snap a buckle on a velvet shoe.

Maybe it’s better that the other/others showed up at Lulu’s door making sounds like laughing hyenas who rupture fantasies. Nothing in god’s world was ever that funny That must have been the first of his deferred dreams. He went from rapture to disgust. Me? He later said: “that’s what the state of ‘loose’ women, and war does to what was, what is, and what may be coming. God help us all.”

As Alsee came down the ascending stairs with a load of laundry, he caught the black angel mirrored in the thousand twirling crystal droplets all hanging in mid air. Somehow he knew instantly that she belonged to Catnip (Kitty Rose) in a dangerous way. He would have fallen on his knees right then and there, to save her, but there was the business of the stairs he was coming down. Suddenly laughed at him. “I’ve come for the music—I’ve heard in that other place for two thousand years, I won’t stop the killing here.”

Change. It slipped in. Not by making little clucking noises—that nobody could hear even if they were standing right next to you, or laying down with their head picture-perfect on one of Mary Catherine’s starched doilies just a few inches from your own. It comes in a heartbeat. A snap; a ready or not, here I come. Like the kind of woman that gets off of a late night. The one that makes you think about the China platter left you by your grandmother, or the line of sass running along the arch in the feather in the hat of your favorite aunt. But alongside all that you thought of war, famine, and just as quick the good times after. Always, but always, a woman like that means change, and wears a hat. Maybe not like this one, but change does wear one. Usually it’s pulled down over one eye. Seams straight. Coat long. Collar up. Lipstick faint. Gloves. Though, not like this one.

I am the silence that is incomprehensible,
and the idea whose remembrance is. . . .

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

Despite what you think you know, I am the dark side of god/
goddess. Confined to the catacombs of memory. The holy fathers
cut off my head, missing my heart by inches.

Much of me lay entombed in the desert, waiting. In that silence
I heard music. I am the reconciler of opposites. Taste first my bitter
hate at those who left me in the desert for two thousand years.
Next my love that explodes all around you.

. . . somebody is singing, and I am everywhere these stories
are told. . . .