GIFT

by

Pamela Sneed

*deadly nightshade, a cardiac and respiratory stimulant, having purplish-red flowers and black berries
Acknowledgments
Gift Makau (d. 2014), a young black lesbian was raped and strangled with wire and shoelace. A hosepipe had been shoved into her mouth. Her body was found in Tshing, Ventersdorp, South Africa.

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The Well Returned to For Strength

Going to the doctor to receive information regarding her heart
my mother wore the necklace I gave her for Christmas
crystal clear, sparkling, purple, pink
blue light
wrapped around her neck and worn as a power source.
Everywhere I went she says people asked where did you get that necklace from
It’s beautiful.
My daughter gave it to me.
Their eyes surprised.
Daughter, they repeat.
Daughter, my mother says.
Over the years
I’ve become my mother’s hero
carried by wind whenever she says daughter
Happy to be my mother’s inspiration source
the well returned to for strength.

For Gift Makau
1996 - 2014

These vicious killings must end …
These stories on television exist but people say can’t be analyzed in terms of race class or gender.
So for the last time I’m asking landlines…really?!
Leading me to say that the architects of slavery, Jim Crow, apartheid, lynching, and gender inequality have brought us the greatest invention yet. Greater than the monstrous Frankenstein
A metaphor for birth, progeny and encroaching technology
Like atom bombs and chemical warfare only slower
longer lasting, slavery with no name
addiction, the zombie apocalypse
I always point out to my students the only people on television openly with no rights are addicts as we can’t ourselves go days without sugar, a smartphone, coffee, shopping, new clothes, plugging into a public feed.
I’ve said before and will say again if you want revolution, one morning real early empty shelves and pantries at Starbucks, take coffee out of every grocery store, 7/11, when the people are mad, angry, despondent, have nowhere to turn, not looking, take sugar.
I have this dream of a sci-fi, a slave woman traveling to the future which is now, guided through a landscape of popular television, she does not see a free people.
In the words of poet Jayne Cortez with my own mix
She can still see pus, scars smell stench
of the maggot infested infected laceration of whips people still haunted living their past.
point recount the rights and endless perks of being a bottom bitch. Also, I'm completely a fan of ebonics, it's creative.
Teacher-poet Sekou Sundiata said Black Americans speak two languages, but as a Professor myself, everyone knows language is important to Black a student's survival.
Week after week it gets hard watching Empire where Black characters speak an unintelligible language, ax, regardless, obliterating the verb to be
As an aside, I never understood one word of Buckwheat, Urkel, or cared for what The Fresh Prince, or Gary Coleman ever said
Last week a Black secretary on Empire modeled straight after Prissy in the Gone with the Wind know nothing about birthing Babies handbook said she knew nothing about her mistress in the Berk-shires, pronouncing Berk, then Shires, making one word two, Landlines...Really?!
This week's Scandal episode was based on Monica Lewinsky and the phenomenon of young girls killed by politicians literally and figuratively buried beneath Capitol Hill like bones of former slaves buried beneath city hall and the Court House in NYC
at the African Burial Ground Museum on Lower Broadway, their bones talk, I pray there sometimes, take students so they'll know, can hear.
Anyway, after publishing an exposé, the girl on fictional TV has her throat slit by people supposed to protect her just when Monica Lewinsky in real life emerged in a Ted Talk to say she was the first victim of internet bullies like those women subjects in a High School social studies class publicly stoned, wore scarlet letters were burnt alive, banished, medieval practices as medieval to some as landlines in a current configuration.

Gift
Heart halved
split
an orange
piece of meat
spliced straight down the middle.
As anyone else, I'm concerned about police brutality/racism the body of Michael Brown laying in the street dead 4 hours dead like slaves tied to masts/rails/left to rot/dry.
At least in slavery, he might still be alive, only wounded loss of fingers toes an eye organ-body part.
Like anyone, I'm concerned about the 21st century what it means when a young Black person can’t walk through a White neighborhood legally and his killer goes free committing one sociopathic crime after another.
Juror B something or another, hidden behind a black screen but no matter you can still tell how White she was calling him George and you can just see her squeezing his baby cheeks.
I'm skipping around but I can see Nelson Mandela burning the passbook controlling and tracking his whereabouts before the technology.
One of the apps for iPhone is called passbook.
It was involuntarily placed and appeared on my phone, I wonder if any of the billions of users worldwide called to complain.
In South Africa, the last tweet of Oscar Pistorius's girlfriend was about the young Black South African woman, Anene Booysen brutally gang raped and murdered ... perhaps she predicted her own murder, not rape but demise.
I was stunned by the recent rape and murder of a young Black lesbian in South Africa
I can’t believe her parents looked down into the cradle and called her Gift
Our Gift
God’s Gift
a human Gift murdered
All of these things concern me
Eleanor Bumpurs still concerns me, a 66 year old Black woman in a wheelchair shot by police.
They said she threatened them with a knife.
One of the protesters at the Black Lives Matter demo at Grand Central was an older White man who stood for hours didn’t move held up a sign that read Eleanor Bumpurs because he remembered her.
She was the subject of mammoth fears. They said only bullets could take her down.
But what I’m afraid of today is not just police guns Being shot wounded killed without trial or justice
My 85 year old aunt who lived through some part of segregation and civil rights says she is afraid every time her 14 year old Black grandson leaves the house.
What bothers me most causes the black in my eyes
is not that big sugar mammy sphinx with enormous teats and exposed vulva
dead blank stares of tar babies melting into molasses and all of us gathered with our cell phones to take pictures gathered around lynching trees just walking through the door we are called to participate.
All of us walking into what appears as a circus tent
messes of rich White people
She is also the object of not just one, but two powerful White men she’s addicted to.
She’s abused, spied on, exchanged, goes back and forth but it’s said it musn’t be interpreted this way
These shows like Scandal and Empire claim to lift us like Scotty, Kirk and Spock into other dimensions but when a character confesses murder or a profound family secret will still use a landline to communicate although I know it’s for theatricality, I’m giving it like Siskel & Ebert a thumbs down, also major Black woman side-eye asking Landlines, Really?! Even I, an artist, part of the proletariat know not to send emails texts or use landlines to communicate things of importance. All that is public is private, proven by Watergate, Monica Lewinsky, the CIA in the 60’s, everything is tapped.
My mother even talks about the government spying on us through the TV
I never understood how a smart politician like Anthony Weiner posted his weiner on Twitter and is not caught once but twice sexting someone other than his wife.
Everything is fun and games but some young Black women students watch Basketball Wives, Being Mary Jane, Scandal and Empire without irony like a documentary film series, part lesson plan instructed by the character of Mary Jane on BET, involved with a married man justified because his wife doesn’t give head right and I kid you not they said this.
My students think there’s power in being a ho, called bottom bitch like reading a script or teleprompter I watched someone point by
I don’t dis those who want/need direct connects to their mothers fathers and relatives of eons past. 
I don’t dis those of us who don’t want to wear blue tooth technologies, iwatches, google glasses as we shuttle toward post humanism with meteoric speed, blending of woman, man, machine bionic eyes, robot appendages have been introduced for maximum dependability.
For non-believers here’s a test: try losing your smart phone. 
See if you don’t panic, sweat, shake, have the same feelings of breaking up with someone you really liked, wanted to marry or worse, like coming down off the highest high, crashing down feeling lost and purposeless.
One of my students once got up in a Speech class seriously introduced her iphone and ipad as family members
In the University, I teach Ideas of the Human basic philosophy, difference, humans in daily ruts.
After watching the film Her, about a man who falls for his feminized operating system, I ask students, “Who is more programmed man, woman or machines?” “Is interspecies dating a thing of the future?” “Aren’t we already doing that?”
No I don’t dis those opting out, but will sooner or later be overtaken with encroaching inevitability of machine domination, the new slavery.
My issue is with these increasingly popular shows with Black women leads that boast of being post-Black no longer tethered to ordinary ideas of race Black and White relationships that are not like in the Sci-Fi Blade Runner, actually replicas of Mammy and Slave Master, Olivia Pope is supposed to be a powerful Black woman Washington scandal fixer but her role like the help, is cleaning up lining up in hot sun taking our turns while the real mammy looks down from heaven and laughs hysterically, as we gaze at our Sara Baartman sugar bleached white like the walls of Cape Coast Castle painted white for a more sanitary viewing.
Slaves in Haiti had a 4-6 year life span on sugar plantations A brutal brutal history.
What concerns me today is not just racism but what Kara Walker slyly describes and titles, “The Subtlety.”
Holy Temple

Hits hard
harder than violent racist deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Walter Scott combined
harder than the rape and murder of a young Black lesbian
named Gift in South Africa
hurts as much, more than young healthy pictures of Whitney Houston
then seeing her face bloated bubbled like Emmitt Till’s
I’m not even counting scars inside
I don’t blame Bobby Brown or drugs
I blame the system of celebrity for killing her
no, news of the massacre in South Carolina by Dylann Roof
hits harder
because it feels as if I knew those people
Black Black Red Brown Black Tan Taupe Yellow People
my father’s people, grandmother, grandfather’s people
from the Carolinas.
My grandfather was a Baptist minister.
He started Holy Temple Church in Massachusetts
I knew their grief, their church chords, the way their voices
crackled and sparkled when they sang, “Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine,”
I knew Wednesday night prayer meeting and Sunday school,
the way bible stories were woven into everyday allegories
about triumph and survival.
I knew aunts, cousins, uncles
family trees connected all the way back to plantations.
I knew pride, pageantry, costumes.
Once, at a funeral, I saw a preacher count days, seconds, hours, minutes
moments a man was alive.
Saw a congregation lay hands on a man, pray so hard, when they finished

Landlines... Really?!

This poem promises to be my greatest yet.
won’t be, at least initially ordinary poetry stuff
you know love lost, found, budding spring, broken heart, isms,
daily injustices, Walter Scott, Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin
Boko Haram, Bring Back our Girls, The Kenyan Massacre
a Black Man hung from a noose recently in Mississippi, a noose
hung on college campuses, a spate of Transgender teen suicides.
It won’t be about the shooting at AME Church in South Carolina,
nine members killed by a man they welcomed and prayed with.
It won’t be about the death of Bobbi Kristina Brown,
daughter of Whitney Houston and Bobby Brown
the grief and tragedy of it all.
No, this poem will be about Alexander Graham Bell’s
greatest invention: telephones, commonly referred
to and known as landlines. Yes, landlines.
Like John Stewart, now Trevor Noah who blends news
with satirical comedy, this segment is captioned in red letters,
flashes across the screen and asks rhetorically like referring to 8
track players or mixed tapes, landlines Really?!
which doesn’t dis those who give up smart phones, tired of
expenses
hidden fees
getting wound and tweaked up all day
like addicts to meth amphetamines
like anorexics trolling FB Twitter and Instagram
constantly binging and purging.
I don’t dis those who want to return to good old days
simpler times with a plastic, now-metal near monstrosity
used for dialing up, pressing pound, double lines to avoid busy
signals and star 69 to catch stalkers were great progress.
I can't stop thinking about Steve Biko
his battered face
they say he hung himself too
the world's outrage
who will pray now
for us
America

he never touched drugs no more
saw men and women jump up seized by electric spirit.
On Easter, my grandfather shouted from the pulpit, “Fellowship, Fellowship!"
Saw women and men squat give blues birth, jazz, pop, Rock and Roll
Sister Rosetta, Mahalia, Sam, Aretha, Etta, Gladys, Whitney,
Spinners and Four Tops.
My grandmother's grayness
cancer, chemo then death. Later, I moved away
changed names
grew tall
went back and introduced myself
to two women elders in my grandfather's church
they said we know who you are
calling me my birth name, Ila
I knew these people, their language, the way preachers spoke,
women testified
It was the first poetry I ever knew
ecstatic rhythm, church chords, people filing
into pews on Sunday morning.
I knew them
cornerstones
backbones
scholars
athletes
teachers
poets
singers
dancers
orators
actors
mathematicians
liberation theologians
mothers
fathers
children
sisters
daughters
cousins
nieces
nephews
sons
on marches, in prayer
fingers eyes toes teeth
tear gassed, burnt alive,
beaten, shot, executed
Clementa Pickney
Depayne Middleton Doctor
Cynthia Hurd
Susi Jackson
Ethel Lance
Tywanza Sanders
Rev. Dr. Daniel Simmons
Sharonda Coleman-Singleton
Myrna Thompson
I knew them like the family
I come from.

Rope a Dope

for Sandra Bland

I had just begun to relax
celebrate the marriage equality ruling
I had just begun feeling with Obama I was
watching Ali in trouble off the ropes
delivering to his opponent the rope-a-dope
my father's eyes
excitement
I was just beginning to breathe air
feel exhilarated at images of
Joe Biden and President Obama running
down halls of the White House with rainbow flags
like boys with kites-soaring
I was just beginning to forgive deaths of my brothers
to AIDS
not forget
there should still be tribunals
for them and every woman abused
by the medical system
I had just begun to turn a corner on Mike Brown, Freddie Gray
Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, The massacre at AME
not think of it all everyday.
Then the police kill this young Black girl in custody in Texas
claim she committed suicide
I remember we’re a war nation
in war times
I imagine how James, Bayard, Nina felt
seeing a nation turn its dogs, teeth, gas, hoses
bullets on children and adults
the trophy from Taylor Swift, hit her over the head
with it like Bam Bam’s character
in a cartoon and drag her ass to the White House,
the way men who lost lovers to AIDS
dropped their ashes on the front lawn to protest.
I’m not for violence against women, but I’m over Barbie and Ken.
Right now, we need Kanye to proclaim as he did during Katrina
“George Bush doesn’t like Black people”
and mix it into every song we hear.
The last presidential debate between Mitt Romney and Obama
was so boring,
we were desperately in need of Nene from the Atlanta Housewives to grab
something like the toupee off of Mitt Romney’s head and run away with it.
I watched the Video Music Awards on the music channel last night.
Nikki Minaj’s ass harkened all the way back to the Hottentot
the Black woman
who performed with an animal trainer.
Through Nikki, Kim K, J Lo and Iggy Azalea Sara Baartman is in again.
When Usher slapped Nikki’ ass in a perfunctory way
you know the contract clause said he mustn’t hit too hard
because like Tina Turner’s legs her ass is insured
All the while this was going on Jimmy Fallon showed up to sing
a heart wrenching rendition of Mammy Oh Mammy.
Really all of these shows are like some turn of the century shit
with that Black on Black face tap dancing duo before Amos
and Andy, the brother’s big red lips and charcoaled
eyes, for women not even a hint of burlesque.
Miley Cyrus cried and dedicated her trophy to homeless runaways which
makes me think Kim and Kanye instead of North West
should have named their baby North Star
in honor of all slaves searching and guided to freedom.

Untitled
Sometimes in that great
theater of life
if you’ve survived
you’ll get to go back again
to that thing that troubled you
couldn’t be resolved.
It will come back in a situation familiar
and this time you get to say
to the lover who blamed
lied
told all of her friends,
It takes two
You get to see those who attacked
bullied in new light.
It was always more about them
than you
even though you’ll always
have scars.
This time you get to get dressed
put clothes on
say no
if the sky doesn’t fall out
and you don’t get swallowed
by the ground
frozen stiff
solid
And your voice holds out
you can say
I never ever deserved that
and believe it too
for the first time.
No longer taking on
their identity for you.
This time
if you’ve survived
you don’t care
what’s said
your liberty
is more important
than fear
you’re willing to be alone
stand alone
for truth.

Circus Acts

The whole country reduced to manipulation and gossip
I have to admit sometimes I just sit and sit and I stare and stare
I think things like Kim and Kanye instead of North West
should have named
their baby North Star in honor of Harriet and all the slaves who followed
it's light to freedom.
Right now, I’m thinking of Ferguson Missouri, Michael Brown’s body
laying dead in the street uncovered for hours after
a cop shot him for jaywalking.
I think of Trayvon Martin's body laying miles from home
unidentified in a morgue without a toe tag.
Talking to my students about Trayvon one of them says
“Dogs have more rights
in this country than Black men.” “Remember Michael Vick got in
trouble for pitting and killing dogs?
They threw the book at him, he lost his job and career—“
Which makes me think right now we are doing this all wrong
maybe we should
send the ASPCA or PETA down to Ferguson, Missouri
to prosecute the cop Daren Wilson, because these organizations
seem much more adept at getting justice.
And sometimes I’m just sitting there in front of the screen, I can’t move.
I stare at gaunt cheekbones of movie stars,
I suspect one is anorexic but it isn’t my business to judge
women's weight. Right now, with all
the wars going on in Syria, Afghanistan, with ISIS, between Israel
and Palestine, in Ferguson, it would be a good time for
Kanye to enter stage left, to grab