

Stephanie  
J. Woods

*my papa  
used to play  
checkers*

Poems by Laura Neal

*Assembly*

in response to *your destination is in a  
different time zone*

*Ode to a Watermelon*

in response to *watermelon sandcastle*

*Checkers: Duplex*

in response to *my papa used to play checkers*

*In Africa, Okra is gumbo*

in response to *we makin' gumbo?*

*The Remaining Factor*

in response to *Carolina Gold*

# *Assembly*

Before I was born, I was prepared for.  
My aunts gathered their hips in a room  
Their hands weaving a loose memory  
As wild and shapeless as water  
The cotton chore an inheritance  
Black as the bible, black as the valley.

Somebody made a joyful noise in the valley  
Clapped their hands and survived for  
Me. The breath of my body an inheritance  
Bouncing on the walls of this blue room.  
All my aunts arrived here under water  
Centuries of labor wetting the neck of memory.

They sit for hours trying to bend the memory  
Forward, give us more light in the valley  
And more bridges for this water.  
The future is what we look backwards for  
Anchor our custom trials to make room  
For promises, our bodies an inheritance.

This checkered fabric on my back is inheritance  
Carried thousands of miles on memory.  
Sometimes memory feigns future a waiting room  
But we all know about the lily in the valley.  
After I was born, I was prayed for  
My head laid back under the water

Our history leaping up from the water.  
Everyday we wear our inheritance  
All my aunts were prepared for.  
Let me learn to stitch the memory  
To sing in the orchestra valley  
To rest my hips in an open room.

This valley arrives daily in my room  
For a trumpet to sound across the water  
My inheritance weaving a memory.

# *Ode to Watermelon*

You're just as sweet as

you wanna be

all golden and

red inside.

Look at those green stripes

stretching over you like

a timeline

all your black seeds in one place.

You're everybody's favorite come

summertime.

At the backyard

barbecue

you make a mess of our hands

your water wetting our necks.

Like magic you keep

growing and

you too were given

a common name after

Africa.

Some folks called you

cow-castle fruit

put in the bitter earth

and pluck out sweet.

This world has made fruit

of many bodies

that ripened in the half-dark.

So much fruitless labor

and somehow dear watermelon

somehow you survived

what was never meant to end.

# *Checkers Duplex*



Black and red chips clapping on the board.

This game a memory we walk toward.

Games make memories we walk toward.

Our mother's heads checkered with history.

Our father's heads checkered with history.

Their trebled voices asking me what I know.

Some trebled voices I'll never know.

Look how we fold this story into a square:

In Senegal, they fold and dye fabric in squares,

The pattern of kings on their legs.

They wear the patterns of kings on their legs.

Warm nights we yell "king me" on a folding chair.

We still yell "king me" on a folding chair.

Black and red chips clapping the board.

# *In Africa, Okra is gumbo*

I.

I think I will never be finished dreaming.  
The reward of courage might get you a song  
Might get you a warm meal when the day ends  
Some fried okra or gumbo. What it took  
To be fed. All those empty mouths when  
The sun disappeared in the ocean. All those  
Heads braided with seeds and rice spilling  
In the New World. Who knew this box braid  
Could be a ship? Who had faith they would get out  
From the bottom of it?

II.

I keep dreaming up new things to do with my hair.  
I should sing a song to it, feed it a good meal.  
In Africa, the word for okra is gumbo, we eat  
Good on that crop. One pot feeds a lot of mouths  
Once the sun is done spilling its heat. Even  
Enough left over for tomorrow. And I never knew  
Where I learned to tie these knots. I never thought  
It could hold more than a shell.

# *The Remaining Facts*

vessel and rice

held the bottom of

remembering

time nodes

on the surface

we carry everywhere

blackness map-less

and absolute

we divine nothing

between the flowering

Japonica, Indica, Jasmine

whose good flesh

has millions of witnesses

the hazard of lost names

made and remade

the beach was a trading zone

we pray all night

for the origin story

we build a museum

home