in a world beyond 1200 Broad Street was a thought that never entered my mind. I believed that she stayed home because it was the place she liked best. Just as Daddy Gus seemed to need to walk — to roam.

After his death it was easier to see the ways that they complemented and completed each other. For suddenly, without him as a silent backdrop, Baba's spirit was diminished. Something in her was forever lonely and could not find solace. When she died, tulips, her favorite flower, surrounded her. The preacher told us that her death was not an occasion for grief, for "it is hard to live in a world where your choicest friends are gone." Daddy Gus was the companion she missed most. His presence had always been the mirror of memory. Without it there was so much that could not be shared. There was no witness.

Seeing their life together. I learned that it was possible for women and men to fashion households arranged around their own needs. Power was shared. When there was an imbalance, Baba ruled the day. It seemed utterly alien to me to learn about black women and men not making families and homes together. I had not been raised in a world of absent men. One day I knew I would fashion a life using the patterns I inherited from Baba and Daddy Gus. I keep treasures in my cigar box, which still smells after all these years. The quilt that covered me as a child remains, full of ink stains and faded colors. In my trunks are braided tobacco leaves, taken from over home. They keep evil away — keep bad spirits from crossing the threshold. Like the ancestors they guard and protect.

13

A Place Where the Soul Can Rest

Street corners have always been space that has belonged to men — patriarchal territory. The feminist movement did not change that. Just as it was not powerful enough to take back the night and make the dark a safe place for women to lurk, roam, and meander at will, it was not able to change the ethos of the street corner — gender equality in the workplace, yes, but the street corner turns every woman who dares lurk into a body selling herself, a body looking for drugs, a body going down. A female lurking, lingering, lounging on a street corner is seen by everyone, looked at, observed. Whether she wants to be or not she is prey for the predator, for the Man, be he pimp, police, or just passerby. In cities women have no outdoor territory to occupy. They must be endlessly moving or enclosed. They must have a destination. They cannot loiter or linger.

Verandas and porches were made for females to have outdoor space to occupy. They are a common feature of southern living. Before air-conditioning cooled every hot space the porch was the summertime place, the place everyone flocked to in the early mornings and in the

late nights. In our Kentucky world of poor southern black neighborhoods of shotgun houses and clapboard houses, a porch was a sign of living a life without shame. To come out on the porch was to see and be seen, to have nothing to hide. It signaled a willingness to be known. Oftentimes the shacks of the destitute were places where inhabitants walked outside straight into dust and dirt — there was neither time nor money to make a porch.

The porches of my upbringing were places of fellowship — outside space women occupied while men were away, working or on street corners. To sit on one's porch meant chores were done — the house was cleaned, food prepared. Or if you were rich enough and the proud possessor of a veranda, it was the place of your repose while the house-keeper or maid finished your cleaning. As children we needed permission to sit on the porch, to reside if only for a time, in that place of leisure and rest. The first house we lived in had no porch. A cinder-block dwelling made for working men to live in while they searched the earth for oil outside city limits, it was designed to be a waiting place, a place for folks determined to move up and on — a place in the wilderness. In the wilderness there were no neighbors to wave at or chat with or simply to holler at and know their presence by the slamming of doors as one journeyed in and out. A home without neighbors surely did not require a porch, just narrow steps to carry inhabitants in and out.

When we moved away from the wilderness, when we moved up, our journey of improved circumstance took us to a wood-frame house with upstairs and downstairs. Our new beginning was grand: we moved to a place with not one but three porches — a front porch, a side porch, and a back porch. The side porch was a place where folks could sleep when the heat of the day had cooled off. Taking one's dreams outside made the dark feel safe. And in that safeness, a woman, a child — girl or boy—could linger. Side porches were places for secret meetings, places where intimate callers could come and go without being seen, spend time without anyone knowing how long

they stayed. After a year of living with a side porch and six teenaged girls, Daddy sheetrocked, made walls, blocked up the door so that it became our brother's room, an enclosed space with no window to the outside.

We sat on the back porch and did chores like picking walnuts, shucking corn, and cleaning fish, when Baba, Mama's mama, and the rest had a good fishing day, when black farmers brought the fruit of their labor into the city. Our back porch was tiny. It could not hold all of us. And so it was a limited place of fellowship. As a child I felt more comfortable there, unobserved, able to have my child's musings, my day-dreams, without the interruptions of folks passing by and saying a word or two, without folks coming up to sit a spell. At Mr. Porter's house (he was the old man who lived and died there before we moved in) there was feeling of eternity, of timelessness. He had imprinted on the soul of this house his flavor, the taste and scent of a long lived life. We honored that by calling his name when talking about the house on First Street.

To our patriarchal dad, Mr. V, the porch was a danger zone — as in his sexist mindset all feminine space was designated dangerous, a threat. A strange man walking on Mr. V's porch was setting himself up to be a possible target: walking onto the porch, into an inner feminine sanctum, was in the eyes of any patriarch just the same as raping another man's woman. And we were all of us — mother, daughters — owned by our father. Like any patriarch would, he reminded us from time to time whose house we lived in — a house where women had no rights but could indeed claim the porch — colonize it and turn it into a place where men could look but not touch — a place that did not interest our father, a place where he did not sit. Indeed, our daddy always acted as though he hated the porch. Often when he came home from work he entered through the back door, making his territory, taking us unaware.

We learned that it was best not to be seen on the porch often when he walked up the sidewalk after a long day's work. We knew our

place: it was inside, making the world comfortable for the patriarch, preparing ourselves to bow and serve — not literally to bow, but to subordinate our beings. And we did. No wonder then that we loved the porch, longed to move outside the protected patriarchal space of that house that was in its own way a prison.

Like so much else ruined by patriarchal rage, so much other female space damaged, our father the patriarch took the porch from us one intensely hot summer night. Returning home from work in a jealous rage, he started ranting the moment he hit the sidewalk leading up to the steps, using threatening, ugly words. We were all females there on that porch, parting our bodies like waves in the sea so that Mama could be pushed by hurting hands, pushed through the front door, pushed into the house, where his threats to kill and kill again would not be heard by the neighbors. This trauma of male violence took my teenage years and smothered them in the arms of a deep and abiding grief — took away the female fellowship, the freedom of days and nights sitting on the porch.

Trapped in the interstices of patriarchal gender warfare, we stayed off the porch, for fear that just any innocent male approaching would be seen by our father and set off crazy rage. Coming in from the outside I would see at a distance the forlorn look of a decimated space, its life energy gone and its heart left lonely. Mama and Daddy mended the wounded places severed by rage, maintaining their intimate bond. They moved away from Mr. Porter's house into a small new wood frame structure, a house without a porch, and even when a small one was added it was not a porch for sitting, just a place for standing. Maybe this space relieved Dad's anxiety about the dangerous feminine, about female power.

Surely our father, like all good patriarchs, sensed that the porch as female gathering place represented in some vital way a threat to the male dominator's hold on the household. The porch as liminal space, standing between the house and the world of sidewalks and streets, was symbolically a threshold. Crossing it opened up the possibility of

change. Women and children on the porch could begin to interpret the outside world on terms different from the received knowledge gleaned in the patriarchal household. The porch had no master; even our father could not conquer it. Porches could be abandoned but they could not be taken over, occupied by any one group to the exclusion of others.

A democratic meeting place, capable of containing folks from various walks of life, with diverse perspectives, the porch was free-floating space, anchored only by the porch swing, and even that was a symbol of potential pleasure. The swing hinted at the underlying desire to move freely, to be transported. A symbol of play, it captured the continued longing for childhood, holding us back in time, entrancing us, hypnotizing us with its back-and-forth motion. The porch swing was a place where intimacies could be forged, desire arising in the moment of closeness swings made possible.

In the days of my girlhood, when everyone sat on their porches, usually on their swings, it was the way we all became acquainted with one another, the way we created community. In M. Scott Peck's work on community-making and peace, *The Different Drum*, he explains that true community is always integrated and that "genuine community is always characterized by integrity." The integrity that emerged in our segregated communities as I was growing up was based on the cultivation of civility, of respect for others and acknowledgement of their presence. Walking by someone's house, seeing them on their porch, and failing to speak was to go against the tenets of the community. Now and then, I or my siblings would be bold enough to assume we could ignore the practice of civility, which included learning respect for one's elders, and strut by folks' houses and not speak. By the time we reached home, Mama would have received a call about our failure to show courtesy and respect. She would make us take our walk again and perform the necessary ritual of speaking to our neighbors who were sitting on their porches.

In *A World Waiting to Be Born: The Search for Civility*, M. Scott Peck extends his conversation on making community to include the prac-

tice of civility. Growing up in the segregated South, I was raised to believe in the importance of being civil. This was more than just a recognition of the need to be polite, of having good manners; it was a demand that I and my siblings remain constantly aware of our interconnectedness and interdependency on all the folk around us. The lessons learned by seeing one's neighbors on their porches and stopping to chat with them, or just to speak courteously, was a valuable way to honor our connectedness. Peck shares the insight that civility is consciously motivated and essentially an ethical practice. By practicing civility we remind ourselves, he writes, that "each and every human being — you, every friend, every stranger, every foreigner is precious." The etiquette of civility then is far more than the performance of manners: it includes an understanding of the deeper psychoanalytic relationship to recognition as that which makes us subjects to one another rather than objects.

African Americans have a long history of struggling to stand as subjects in a place where the dehumanizing impact of racism works continually to make us objects. In our small-town segregated world, we lived in communities of resistance, where even the small everyday gesture of porch sitting was linked to humanization. Racist white folks often felt extreme ire when observing a group of black folks gathered on a porch. They used derogatory phrases like "porch monkey" both to express contempt and to once again conjure up the racist iconography linking blackness to nature, to animals in the wild. As a revolutionary threshold between home and street, the porch as liminal space could also then be a place of antiracist resistance. While white folk could interpret at will the actions of a black person on the street, the black person or persons gathered on a porch defied such interpretation. The racist eye could only watch, yet never truly know, what was taking place on porches among black folk.

I was a little girl in a segregated world when I first learned that there were white people who saw black people as less than animals. Sitting on the porch, my siblings and I would watch white folks bring

home their servants, the maids and cooks who toiled to make their lives comfortable. These black servants were always relegated to the back seat. Next to the white drivers in the front would be the dog and in the back seat the black worker. Just seeing this taught me much about the interconnectedness of race and class. I often wondered how the black worker felt when it came time to come home and the dog would be placed in front, where racism and white supremacy had decreed no black person could ride. Although just a child, witnessing this act of domination, I understood that the workers must have felt shamed, because they never looked out the window; they never acknowledged a world beyond that moving car.

It was as though they were riding home in a trance — closing everything out was a way to block out the shaming feelings. Silent shadows slouched in the back seats of fancy cars, lone grown-up workers never turned their gaze toward the porch where "liberated" black folks could be seen hanging together. I was the girl they did not see, sitting in the swing, who felt their pain and wanted to make it better. And I would sit there and swing, going back and forth to the dreaming rhythm of a life where black folks would live free from fear.

Leaving racialized fear behind, I left the rhythm of porch swings, of hot nights filled with caring bodies and laughter lighting the dark like june bugs. To the West Coast I went to educate myself, away from the lazy apartheid of a jim crow that had been legislated away but was still nowhere near gone, to the North where I could become the intellectual the South back then had told me I could not be. But like the black folks anthropologist Carol Stack writes about, who flee the North and go South again, yearning for a life they fear is passing them by, I too returned home. To any southerner who has ever loved the South, it is always and eternally home. From birth onward we breathed in its seductive heady scent, and it is the air that truly comforts. From birth onward as southerners we were seduced and imprinted by glimpses of a civic life expressed in communion not found elsewhere. That life was embodied for me in the world of the porch.

Looking for a home in the new South, that is, the place where jim crow finds its accepted expression in crude acting out, I entered a real-estate culture where material profit was stronger than the urge to keep neighborhoods and races pure. Seeking to live near water, where I could walk places, surrounded by an abundant natural tropical landscape, where I can visit Kentucky friends and sit on their porches, I found myself choosing a neighborhood populated mainly by old-school white folks. Searching for my southern home, I looked for a place with a porch. Refurbishing a 1920s bungalow, similar to ones the old Sears and Roebuck catalogue carried for less than seven hundred dollars with or without bathroom, I relished working on the porch. Speaking to neighbors who did not speak back, or one who let me know that they came to this side of town to be rid of lazy blacks, I was reminded how the black families who first bought homes in "white" neighborhoods during the civil rights era suffered — that their suffering along with the pain of their allies in struggle who worked for justice makes it possible for me to choose where I live. By comparison, what I and other black folk experience as we bring diversity into what has previously been a whites-only space is mere discomfort.

In their honor and in their memory, I speak a word of homage and praise for the valiant ones, who struggled and suffered so that I could and do live where I please, and I have made my porch a small everyday place of antiracist resistance, a place where I practice the etiquette of civility. I and my two sisters, who live nearby, sit on the porch. We wave at all the passersby, mostly white, mostly folks who do not acknowledge our presence. Southern white women are the least willing to be civil, whether old or young. Here in the new South three are many white women who long for the old days when they could count on being waited on by a black female at some point in their life, using the strength of their color to weigh her down. A black woman homeowner disrupts this racialized sexist fantasy. No matter how many white women turn their gaze away, we look, and by looking we claim our subjectivity. We speak, offering the southern hospitality, the civility, taught by our parents so that we would be responsible citizens. We speak to everyone.

Humorously, we call these small interventions yet another "Martin Luther King moment." Simply by being civil, by greeting, by "conversating," we are doing the antiracist work of nonviolent integration. That includes speaking to and dialoguing with the few black folk we see from the porch who enter our neighborhood mainly as poorly paid, poorly treated workers. We offer them our solidarity in struggle. In King's famous essay "Loving Your Enemies," he reminded us that this reaching out in love is the only gesture of civility that can begin to lay the groundwork for true community. He offers the insight, "Love is the only force that can turn an enemy into a friend. We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate; we get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity. By its very nature, hate destroys and tears down; by its very nature, love creates and builds up. Love transforms with redemptive power." Inside my southern home, I can forge a world outside of the racist enmity. When I come out on my porch I become aware of race, of the hostile racist white gaze, and I can contrast it with the warm gaze of welcome and recognition from those individual white folks who also understand the etiquette of civility, of community building and peace making.

The "starlight bungalow" — my southern home for now, given the name assigned it in the blueprint of the Sears and Roebuck 1920s catalogue (as a modern nomad I do not stay in place) — has an expansive porch. Stucco over wood, the house has been reshaped to give it a Mediterranean flavor. Architecturally it is not a porch that invites a swing, a rocking chair, or even a bench. Covered with warm sand-colored Mexican tiles, it is a porch that is not made for true repose. Expansive, with rounded arches and columns, it does invite the soul to open wide, to enter the heart of the home, crossing a peaceful threshold.

Returning to the South, I longed for a porch for fellowship and late-night gatherings. However, just as I am true to my inner callings,

I accept what I feel to be the architectural will of the porch and let it stand as it is, without added seats, with only one tin star as ornament. It is a porch for short sittings, a wide standing porch, for looking out and gazing down, a place for making contact — a place where one can be seen. In the old Sears and Roebuck catalogue, houses were given names and the reader was told what type of life might be imagined in this dwelling. My "starlight bungalow" was described as "a place for distinct and unique living." When I first sat on the porch welcoming folk, before entering a dwelling full of light, I proclaimed, in old-South vernacular, "My soul is rested." A perfect porch is a place where the soul can rest.

In Kentucky my house on the hill has a long wide porch facing the lake that is our water source. This is not a porch for meeting and greeting. Perched high on a hill, the house and the porch has no passersby. Like the "starlight bungalow" this is a porch for "quiet and repose." It invites one to be still — to hear divine voices speak.

14

Aesthetic Inheritances: History Worked by Hand

To write this piece I have relied on fragments, bits and pieces of information found here and there. Sweet late night calls to mama to see if she "remembers when." Memories of old conversations coming back again and again, memories like reused fabric in a crazy quilt, contained and kept for the right moment. I have gathered and remembered. I wanted one day to record and document so that I would not participate in further erasure of the aesthetic legacy and artistic contributions of black women. This writing was inspired by the work of artist Faith Ringgold, who has always cherished and celebrated the artistic work of unknown and unheralded black women. Evoking this legacy in her work, she calls us to remember, to celebrate, to give praise.

Even though I have always longed to write about my grandmother's quiltmaking, I never found the words, the necessary language. At one time I dreamed of filming her quilting. She died. Nothing had