

Conversation Pieces
Volume 28

Shotgun Lullabies

Stories and Poems
by
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Sukie Diamond...

Invocation

In the beginning God walked barefoot 'cross the land. She spread Her big toe wide 'cross the rich, deep earth and danced. She stomped so hard with Her rock-bottom feet, the earth split right open. Still She danced. Her big toe sunk deep, and the sweet waters rise quick, quick. That's how we got the rivers, and the lakes, and the creeks.

Still God danced.

She shook Her wide hips and dipped so low, the air blow. That's how we got wind, from God's sweet hip sway. She danced. Cross brown dirt and red clay, Her toes digging valleys in the moist earth, heels rocking, flat plains unfolding, rolling under the balls of Her ashy feet. Still God danced. Mountains forming under the high high arch of her stepping feet. Danced, the earth yielding under the weight of her pretty toes. Danced so hard She sweat, salt rolling in big drops down Her chin and her nose. Danced 'til she cried, salt rolling into the waters 'til we got the oceans and the seas.

Still God Danced. Hot-footed 'cross burning sands in the desert, shaking her hips, *bump bump diddy rump* 'til the earth quake and the trees sprout from seeds. Still God Danced, 'til her wide black toes touched every part of the land, soles slapped against every speck of dirt and sand. God danced 'til her feet were tired, so

sore she had to sit, rest her tailbone down on a high bluff, wipe the sweat from her eye and spit, dip her feet in a cool sip of water, river-deep. The black earth so thick, a rich crust caking the bottom of Her feet, 'til the river turn to mud, and we got the Mississippi.



How Sukie Cross de Big Wata

Before you begin, before you fix your lips to tell the lie, let me see if I can take this tale and bend it straight. I was there when her bloodline first arrived, when her mama folk emerged from tree-borne ships, 'cause I carried them on my back, carried them from the door of no return in the land they call Mother, and I been carrying them ever since. Sayna, 'cause the wood is a witness, and I ain't talking bout no slippery elm or no weeping, whimpering willow tree. Sayna, I'm talking 'bout baobab, mahogany, banyon, mapou, and ebon tree-borne ships that carried those that did not fly away, carried those that did not jump 'cross bloody bows and plunge deep into my depths. Ain't talking bout those who walked back 'cross my neck to their father's shores but those who come 'cross the waters on spiritwood, on my turtleback and limbs outstretched to the land they call Taino, the land in the backdoor of what they call New World.

These lives I carried, while the hollerwood splintered and echoed, their groans creaking like split-bone in the wood. I carried them, her people 'cross the big

watas, and I carried her like I carried the rest—generations 'cross the crying watas to these bitter shores.

So when she dipped her long black toe in my throat, the part they call Sippi—and *the child did not speak*—I asked her did she know my name. *Child*, I say, the muddy waters carrying my words to the riverbank where she stood, *do you know me?* She blink at me like she ain't sure she heard right, so I send a cold current swirling round her toes. *Child*, I say, and I say it again. *Do know your own name? Do you know your mama name?* At the mention of her mama, this womanchile look like she want to sink, not swim, so I send a warm current to tickle the black bottom of her feet. How you gon' 'cross over these watas so wide and dip into that other world, if you don't even know yourself? If you can guess my name, I will tell you a story. And if you listen true, you will know when I am bending it and when I am telling it straight, 'cause like a river, every story got a bend. So, listen, child, and I will carry you, carry you clear over, like I carry all the rest. Carry you from where you come, to where you must go.



How Sukie Come Free

She has many names. Aunt Nancy, Sukie Diamond, Diamond Free, but her navel name was Stella or Dinah, depending on who tell the tale. I'm telling this, and on my end of the river bottom, we called her Stella because no matter who come after her, she always man-

aged to steal away. Now, some folk say Stella mama was a real bad seed, contrary kind of soul, always running. Say the last time she run, her whitefolks dug a hole in the ground and put her in there, belly baby-swole and all, and beat her 'til she couldn't do nothing but grunt. Say when she come out of that hole that night, she was spirit-talking, whispering words ain't no body live long enough to know the meaning to. Saying,

*Stee la dee nah
nah dee la stee
stee la dee nah
nah dee la stee
steeela! deenah!
Steela! Steela!*

Whispering then shouting and yelling them words, part African, part Indian, 'til folk turn a pot over to hold in the song, whispering and shouting 'til she didn't speak no more and her body come still. But her baby, that baby Stella just a kicking in the belly. Folk say they could see her little arms and legs just a waving under the cold dead flesh of her mama. Say Stella birth herself in her owntime, say she come on out kicking and swinging, too, and been swinging ever since.

Say when she was born, her eyes was wide open, not shuteye like most babies but bright as two harvest moons. Say she leaned back, took in her world, saw her mama tree-stump dead—the spirit still fresh on her breath—and didn't drop no tears. No, Stella didn't cry. Stella leaned back, smacked the old granny that held her, and snatched back her navel string. Say she'd bury it her own damned self. Say she'd rather carry her

destiny in her own hands than trust it to some strange bloodtree, cut down 'fore its roots can grow like her mama and all her kin that come before. And some folk say she been carrying that string in a mojo band 'round her waist ever since.

But that night, the night Stella birthed herself, they say she looked round and saw the others' faces and said just as loud for anybody to hear, "I'll eat the clay of my own grave 'fore I'll slave a day in this life or the next, for any man, woman, child or spirit—white, negra, or other." She say this, and then she was gone.

Stella walked right down the path to massa's house, spit, and set the Big House afire. Then the fields; then the tool shack that held every hoe. She kept walking 'til she come 'cross overseer, crook-legged and buck-toe, running from all them burning fields.

Now, overseer was looking mighty 'fraid 'til he see Stella standing up in the row, buck-naked with the backside of a smile on her face. When he saw Stella frowning down at him, he dug his rusty heels into the ground and puff up his chest 'til his black muscles gleamed 'neath all the sweat and dust.

"Where you think you headed, gal?" he asked, like the aim of Stella's long toes wasn't cuss clear. "Who yo' people?"

Now, overseer didn't recognize Stella, but he look her up and down like he thirsty and want a taste. At first sight, Stella didn't say nothing, but her eyes walked all over his face. Seem like she knowed he was the one put her mama in the bellyhole and beat her 'til she spoke in spirit tongue. (What overseer didn't know was that Stella remembered what most forget, on the trip to this

world from the next. She knew why she'd been sent, just not how or when or where. She reckoned she'd just put one foot 'fore the next 'til they carried her to a place that felt like home. But when she come out that night, she knew that bellyhole wasn't it.)

Finally, after a long, hard spell, Stella say, "My mama folk come from heavy-boned ships..." She spit, and sparks fly. "They'se the kind the slavers couldn't half handle..." She spit and mo sparks fly. "...and if you couldn't handle my mama..." Spit, she moving now, "...what make you think you can handle me?"

When she says this, overseer look like he grab the wrong end of a rattler. "Who yo' mama, girl?" he ask, backing up all a sudden.

"Bet you know when I give you this kiss," Stella say, pressing her full lips on his rusty jaw—and burnt off half his face. Overseer cry so loud, his voice seem to come from a hundred throats, distant but close-like.

"*Steela! Steela!*" he cry. She watched him in silence and frowned. Seem like her name in his mouth called down the rain. Stella stood under the baptism a moment, the sky a red sinking ball afire, then she picked up her long feet to go.

When overseer come tumbling down the row, jaw looking like a big ole greasy piece of fatback, folk was ripping and running so, nobody had time to see Stella make her way down the road, through the gates, and on into them woods. And that's how Sukie come free. She walked her way into freedom, carrying that navel string in her hand.

*The nail ain't broke
the nail just bent
and that's the way
the story went*



How Sukie Left Sippi

After Sukie walked down to massa's house, spit, and set the Big House afire, then the fields, the tool shack that held every hoe, and the overseer down in cotton row, folk was ripping and running so, nobody had time to see her make her way down the road, through the gates, and on into the woods. Some folk say that's how she come free, walking her way into freedom, carrying her navel string in her hand.

But that night, the sky was full of cloud-splitters, and the rain felt like heavy hands pounding the earth. In the woods, the tree branches made dark arches, and Sukie ducked beneath them 'til her feet carried her 'cross upturned roots and thorny thickets to an elder-spirit tree whose branches curved just so.

Back then, the woods stayed full of negras, spirits, and haints. Folk running all the time, even if it only for a few days or a week or two, 'til they hear the Word—that being that massa wouldn't turn a lick if they come back within a day of his calling. In them time, a negra could come back when massa say or get the nine and thirty—lashes, that is. Come back or run away for good.

Now, Sukie didn't run. She *walked*. She walked right on through the plum thickets and bilderbrush weeds, and climbed up in that elder tree. Guess she knew then not a bull had been born or a lash made evil enough to break the hard skin on her cold blackflesh. She chuckled to herself 'cause poor overseer never got a chance to give her back a taste. Still, Sukie shut her eyes for a spell and dreamed 'til she woke to see a Screech Owl sitting on her branch. Owl was just a-fidgeting and whispering, shaking his great head. Owl say,

*Oooh wee Sukie
oooh wee Sukie
sho'll in trouble now
oooh wee Sukie
oooh wee Sukie
massa done sent bloodhounds
better get gone
'fore trouble get grown
your scent all over de ground
if they find you
you know what they gone do
nine and thirty lashes
oooh wee oooh!*

Now, Sukie stretch and yawn, blink back remnants of the day. Look old Screech Owl dead in his face and spit. The branch spark and sizzle a l'il in the drizzling dusk. Sukie say, she ain't worried bout no lash 'cause ain't n'am person gon' lay a finger or a scar on her back or leg. Say she heal 'fore the blood rise warm. And can't no man, slaver, teacher, or preacher claim the backroom of her body, mind, or soul. Say she walk in the guts

and scales of holy rollers and got a mojo bone buried deep in her breast. Say she come here, head so full of figurin' and words so old and new, the books still waiting on the seeds to take root—let alone the trees. Say she don't need no pass nor no word from massa. Sukie say she go where she very well please. She say massa got more than her flat feet on his mind. Say massa still be stomping out that big ole fire she start, long after she come and gone. Sukie say this and smile, like she know a secret, and Screech Owl hoot, too. He knowed can't nobody get a hold of Sukie 'cause she a dangerous kind of hussy, a negra gal, damn near one of the most dangerous of all.

Screech Owl knowed this but still he worry. He knowed Sukie whatn't nothing but a day old, and a young'un sitting in newborn skin—no matter how thick and spirit-blessed—still needed a mother's wing in the world.

True, though Sukie had birthed herself in her own-time, climbing from her mama's bone-still womb, and she'd come out kicking and swinging, too. Not shuteye like most natural born babies, but eyes wide open like two harvest moons, *boop!* Sitting up in the sky. Sukie had spoken her first words with a mouth full of teeth and not a tear in her eye, breaking the stunned silence of the others who'd watched her walk away to her doom—or so they thought. And she'd spoken in spirit-tongue, as her mama before her death, rising from the bellyhole to take her freedom, her long feet leading her straight to Screech Owl's elderspirit tree.

Now, Sukie done all that in a woman's fullgrown body that ain't yet seen one day of sun, let alone two,

but inside, her heart was grieving. Seem like the P'il sleep she got was nothing but a drop of sorrow, the taste as bittersweet as wada root and all them big words in her mouth. And for the first time since Sukie climb out her mama womb, seem like she could barely breathe. Her chest felt tight, the breasts heavy with mama-ache and the phantom weight of stolen freedom. She knew there wasn't but one place she could go to relieve it.

'fore Screech Owl could blink and turn his big wobbly head, Sukie was up stretching her long limbs, shaking the elder bark out of her ears, brushing the grief from her eyes and her thick, tangled hair. She was headed for the bellyhole, where they'd buried her mama.

"Owl, I thanks you for the company," Sukie say, "but I'ma have to see 'bout my way."

Sukie leapt from the elderspirit's dark, knotty branches and landed on moist fertile ground. Turned her straight back to go.

Screech Owl could tell by the curve of her hip sway that Sukie wasn't going to turn back. Still he hopped down to a lower branch, his big ole eyes blinking in the dark, crying,

*Aaab Sukie, Aaab Sukie
know it's yo' mama you mourn
but you better turn west
where your fortune be best
or them pattyrollers
gon' make you wish
you whatn't born!*

Now, Sukie turn her back on Screech Owl, didn't want to hear another mumbling word, but seem like

somebody call her name, and it whatn't no owl either. The call echoed from the pit of her own belly, sound like sweet spirits singin'. Then Sukie felt a kiss, soft full lips on her temple, the place where the spirit rest, and she knew it was her mama come to visit.

Sukie shut her eyes, head bowed as blue flames licked her brown skin and slowly spread round the curve of her jaw to her throat. She felt strong arms round her, a bosom that pulsed not with blood but with will, and shoulders as wide as her own.

Sukie stood there, among the elder trees in the south bank of massa's land, embracing the body that for a time had sheltered her own from a world that would make her unfree. Sukie stood there, cradling her mama's head in her arms, breathing—*one mississippi, two mississippi, three mississippi, breathe*. Then her mama spirit disappeared, and Sukie was alone again. She turned her face toward the earth, listening with strained ears for the sound of many movements, sounds dragged off like heavy bails of cotton.

Overhead, the sky opened up, as if to welcome her mama spirit, washing the bloodstains of each moment she'd breathed from the soil. Sukie rose from her square knees and drank skywater, fat drops glistening on her chin.

Soon, she knew, she must leave that place. The Sippi couldn't hold her body no more than it could her mama spirit. The air around her grew dense, thick with spirits, the ancestors pressing against her skin, pushing her forward. Sukie moved as if invisible fingers were gently coaxing her to go. She moved with heavy feet,

allowing the black dirt so full of cottonseed, blood, and bone to fall heavily to the earth through stiff fingers.

Sukie moved with purpose, flinging more of the black mud with each step, until all that remained of her mama's charred body were a few dark smudges on her fingertips and lips.



Some folk say when Sukie got to the river, she turned herself into a stone. You know the kind, smooth and polished and slick. The kind of rock that'll slip out of your fingers if you ain't careful, bust you in your own head. Well, one of them pattyrollers, surprised not to find Sukie barefoot and bleeding on the water's edge, seized a stone just like that one and chunked it clear 'cross the water, clear to the other side of the river, saying that's how he'd bust that negra gal's head if he ever caught sight of her again.

Now, when the stone reached the other side and settled in the dust, it turned into Sukie's straight back again, and Sukie just wiped the dust off her long feet and smile and pointed her long toes west, sangin'—

*Steela Deenah Steela
Steela Deenah Steela
sho'll glad to put Sippi to rest
guess these feets is heading west
there's a wagon train calling my name
leaving Sippi, won't be back again
call me Sukie Diamond
changed to a stone
skipped 'cross the river*

*and now I'm gone
diamond to a stone a stone turned to gold
on my way to the Oregon road*

And that's how Sukie left Sippi. She skipped her way
clear 'cross the river.

*The nail ain't broke
the nail just bent
and that's the way
the story went*