

# Keepers of the Second Throat

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■ BY PATRICIA SMITH

Let me introduce you to my mother, Annie Pearl Smith of Aliceville, Ala. In the 1950s, along with thousands of other apprehensive but determined Southerners, their eyes locked on the second incarnation of the North Star, she packed up her whole life and headed for the city, with its tenements, its promise, its rows of factories like open mouths feeding on hope.

One day not too long ago, I called my mother, but she was too busy to talk to me. She seemed in a great hurry. When I asked her where she was going, she said, “I’m on my way to my English lesson.”

## My Mother Learns English

### I.

Jittery emigrant at 64, my mother is learning English. Pulling rubbery cinnamon-tinged hose to a roll beneath her knees, sporting one swirling Baptist ski slope of a hat, she rides the rattling elevated to a Windy City spire and pulls back her gulp as the elevator hurtles heaven. Then she’s stiffly seated at a scarred oak table across from a white, government-sanctioned savior

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*Patricia Smith’s fifth book of poetry, Blood Dazzler (Coffee House Press, 2008), was a National Book Award finalist. Smith is a four-time individual champion of the national Poetry Slam contest. She appeared in the film SlamNation and on the HBO series Def Poetry Jam. A selection of her poetry was produced as a one-woman play by Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott.*

who has dedicated eight hours a week to straightening afflicted black tongues. She guides my mother patiently through lazy *ings* and *ers*, slowly scraping her throat clean of the moist and raging infection of Aliceville, Alabama. There are muttered apologies for colored sounds. There is much beginning again.

*I want to talk right before I die.*

*Want to stop saying ‘ain’t’ and ‘I done been’  
like I ain’t got no sense. I’m a grown woman.*

*I done lived too long to be stupid,  
acting like I just got off the boat.*

My mother  
has never been  
on a boat.

But 50 years ago, merely a million of her, clutching strapped cases, *Jet’s* Emmett Till issue, and thick-peppered chicken wings in waxed bags, stepped off hot rumbling buses at Northern depots in Detroit, in Philly, in the bricked cornfield of Chicago. Brushing stubborn scarlet dust from their shoes, they said *We North now*, slinging it in backdoor syllable, as if those three words were vessels big enough to hold country folks’ overwrought ideas of light.

### II.

Back then, my mother thought it a modern miracle, this new living in a box stacked upon other boxes, where every flat surface reeked of Lysol and effort and chubby roaches, cross-eyed with Raid, dragged themselves across freshly washed dishes and dropped dizzy from the ceiling into our Murphy beds, our washtubs, our open steaming pots of collards.



MELANIE CERVANTES

**Any child with a yesterday  
is looking for a way to sing  
tomorrow.**

**III.**

My mother's voice is like homemade cornbread,  
slathered with butter, full of places for heat to hide.  
When she is pissed, it punches straight out  
and clears the room. When she is scared,  
it turns practical, matter-of-fact, like when she called  
to say

*They found your daddy this morning,  
somebody shot him, he dead.*

*He ain't come to work this morning, I knowed  
something was wrong.*

When mama talks, the Southern swing of it  
is wild with unexpected blooms,  
like the fields she never told me about in Alabama.  
Her rap is peppered with *ain't gots* and *I done beens*  
and *be be's* just like mine is when I'm color among color.  
During worship, talk becomes song. Her voice collapses  
and loses all acquaintance with key, so of course,  
it's my mother's fractured alto wailing above everyone—  
uncaged, unapologetic and creaking toward heaven.  
Now she wants to sound proper when she gets there.  
*A woman got some sense and future need to upright herself,  
talk English instead of talking wrong.*

It's strange, the precise rote of Annie Pearl's new mouth.  
She slips sometimes, but is proud when she remembers  
to shun dirt-crafted contractions and double negatives.  
Sometimes I wonder what happened to the warm expanse  
of the red dust woman, who arrived with a little sin  
and all the good wrong words. I dream her breathless,  
maybe leaning forward in her seat on the Greyhound.  
*I ain't never seen*, she begins, grinning through the grime  
at Chicago, city of huge shoulders, thief of tongues.

Of course, there was a factory just two bus rides close,  
a job that didn't involve white babies or bluing laundry,  
where she worked in tense line with other dreamers:  
Repeatedly. Repeatedly. Repeatedly. Repeatedly,  
all those oily hot-combed heads drooping, no talking  
as scarred brown hands romanced machines, just  
the sound of doin' it right, and Juicy Fruit crackling.  
A mere mindset away, there had to be a corner tavern  
where dead bluesmen begged second chances from the juke,  
and where mama, perched man-wary on a stool by the door,  
could look like a Christian who was just leaving.  
And on Sunday, at Pilgrim Rest Missionary Baptist Church,  
she would pull on the pure white gloves of service  
and wail to the rafters when the Holy Ghost's hot hand  
grew itchy and insistent at the small of her back.  
She was His child, finally loosed of that damnable Delta,  
building herself anew in this land of sidewalks,  
blue jukes, and sizzling fried perch in virgin-white boxes.  
See her: All nap burned from her crown, one gold tooth  
winking, soft hair riding her lip, blouses starched hard,  
Orlon sweaters with smatterings of stitched roses,  
A-line skirts the color of unleashed winter.

**I hear other 50-year-old children tell the same stories of their parents, who spent whole lives trying to reshape their throats, to talk right instead of talking wrong, ashamed of the sound they made in the world.**

## **Chicago Stole My Mother's Yesterdays**

**C**hicago not only stole my mother's tongue, it also stole all her yesterdays. From the moment her battered shoes touched new ground, she wanted Alabama gone, she wanted nothing more than to scrub the Delta from her skin, rid her voice of that ridiculous twang, pretend and then adopt a city sophistication. She thought her *ain't gonmas* and *shoul'da dids* and *ain'ts* and *been done bads* signaled ignorance, backwoods, branded her as one of those old-time Negroes. Even years later, after she had married my father, raised a daughter and had to know that her corner was not a promised land but no more than an obscenity of brick, she continued her relentless scrubbing. "I want to talk right before I die," she said, each of her words irreparably Alabama even after she paid an articulate white woman to please fix the mistake of her throat.

And how did my mother's insistence on a blank slate affect me? She slams shut when I ask about the faces in curled-corner Polaroids, when I urge her to tell me what kind of girl she was, when I am curious about her mother, father, grandparents, schooling, baptism, about the steamy hamlet of Aliceville, the stores, schoolhouse, was she fast, was she sullen, did she have the gold tooth then, did she sing? Before her confounding sense of shame, her "Don't know why you wanna know about that nasty ol' down South stuff no way," I was robbed of a history that should have been mine as well as hers.

My husband, on the other hand, has diligently traced his huge raucous family back to the early 1800s. He has remarkably preserved portraits, marriage licenses, death certificates, farm inventory, a rusted scale from his grandfather's store, even a yellowed handkerchief that has been passed gently from hand to hand for over 100 years. As we pore over the few faded and sun-stained photos my mother has reluctantly parted with, I sound like an impossibility, an orphan with a living parent.

That is my mother, I say, pointing to a teenage stranger with an unmistakable gap-toothed grin. But in every picture she is surrounded by ghosts. I say, "I don't know who that is . . . I don't know who that is," because my mother claims not to remember. In one shot, a ghost turned out to be an aunt I didn't know my mother had.

Right now, if I close my eyes and concentrate, I can't hear my mother's voice. I hear something that sounds like her, but it's a tortured hybrid of the voice she had and the one she wanted so much to have. I've told her story time and time again, and I hear other 50-year-old children tell the same stories of their parents, who spent whole lives trying to reshape their throats, to talk right instead of talking wrong, ashamed of the sound they made in the world.

How do we lose our own voices? My mother spent her entire life telling me how wrong I was, how my nose was too broad, my hair too crinkled, my skin—Lord, I wish you could be light like cream, like your cousin Demetria. Don't tell anyone your stories, she said, your shameful stories of a mama from Alabama, a daddy from Arkansas, an apartment where roaches dropped from the ceiling into your bed and mice got trapped in the stove, a neighborhood burned down by its own folks right after the riots when that nice Dr. King got killed. Don't tell anyone your stories, stories you should keep to yourself, stories of how your mama and daddy both work in a candy factory, how your auntie lives in those projects, how the apartment we live in's been broken into three times. Don't tell how you live on the West Side, the side everybody tells you to stay away from, and how the school you go to is one of the worst schools in the whole city. And for goodness' sake girl, talk right. If you want to get out of here, ever, you got to talk like white people, and you got to talk about things white people want to hear.

In other words, I was to become a clean, colorless slate, scrubbed of my own history, a slate where people could write my life any way they wanted—any beginning, any middle, any outcome.

How do we lose our own voices, how do we hand our stories over to other people to tell?

## **The Second Throat**

Follow me now to a 6th-grade classroom at Lillie C. Evans Elementary School in Dade County, Liberty City, Miami. For 10 years, I traveled from my home to teach for two weeks. I remember my first day, bounding into the classroom, full of enthusiasm: "I'm here to teach you poetry!" I faced a room of fallen faces: "That's good, but how can you make our lives better?"

I was shocked to learn that these 10- and 11-year-olds had already been told that their voices were not legitimate voices. Look where you live, they'd been told. Look who your mama is, how your daddy in jail. Look how you've lived your whole life in Miami and nobody's ever bothered to take you to see the ocean. Look at all those red marks on your papers, all those bad grades on your report card. Look at that house where you live, how there's no locks on the doors. Look how you've been written off already. In the morning, my kids would come in buzzing about the shots they heard the night before and if anybody knew what had happened, who'd gotten shot. They came in talking gang signs and beatdowns and who went crazy in church with the Holy Ghost and whose brother was locked up now. But when they sat down to write, it was as if they shed their

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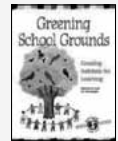


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skins and their stories. They'd sit looking blankly at me, their shoulders sagging from sudden shame and the weight of the world: "I can't spell good. I ain't got good handwriting. And Miss Smith, I ain't got nothing to write about."

I spent all my time introducing them to the idea of the second throat. First of all, all your stories are *yours*. I don't care that you've misspelled this word, that you're using double negatives, and I'll figure out that bad handwriting. What matters is the power that flows through you when you pick up a pen. And you can take any story, even stories that wear on your nerves and sag your shoulders, you can take those stories and you can turn them to triumph. You can pick up a pen and make your whole life make sense. The idea that you can take control of how events affect you—and that includes the mama on drugs, the locked-up brother—the idea that you can process that life through language and come out on the other side a better person, a smarter kid, one who doesn't get beat down by circumstance, but learns how to learn from it.

And they wait. They wait for you. They wait for me. The quiet bespectacled boy with his mind tangled in math is waiting for you. That girl who dressed two sizes too blue is waiting for you. The child who never lifts his eyes is really looking at you, through you, and she is waiting. That tall lanky boy who lives to make everyone laugh is waiting for you. That one white child in a sea of black is waiting for you. That one black child in a sea of white is waiting for

you. The one who takes the bus in from the suburbs is waiting for you. Not just the children with the hard, untellable stories, the stories they hold shamed and close to their chests, but any child with a yesterday is looking for a way to sing tomorrow. They wait for you to open another door beyond verb and adjective, punctuation and equation, beyond memorized fact and pop quiz and line and intersection and angle. They wait for you to open a door that leads to their own lives.

So there is hope. Every single time I walk into a classroom. I tell my story, the story of my parents in the South, the story of growing up in a place that was expected to defeat me. I celebrate every single word a child says, every movement of their pen on paper, and I'm mesmerized when those stories begin to emerge. I stop what I'm doing and I listen. We've got to teach that every utterance, every story is legitimate, that they exist to help you process your own life, to help you move your own life forward, not to complete anyone *else's* picture of you. Never relinquish control of your own life and the stories that have formed you. Write them down and read them to yourselves if no one else wants to hear. My mother used to say, "Ain't nobody trying to hear that nonsense." In the beginning, it doesn't matter if anyone wants to hear. What matters is what you have to say.

I've told you about my mother, about the tragedy of a voice lost, but now let me tell you about my daddy.





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## It Began with My Father

Grizzled and slight, flasher of a marquee gold tooth, Otis Douglas Smith was Arkansas grit suddenly sporting city clothes. Also art of the Great Migration of blacks from the South to Northern cities in the early 1950s, he found himself not in the urban mecca he'd imagined, but in a cramped tenement apartment on Chicago's West Side. There he attempted to craft a life alongside the bag boys, day laborers, housekeepers, and cooks who dreamed the city's wide, unreachable dream.

Many of those urban refugees struggled to fit, but my father never really adopted the no-nonsense-now rhythm of the city. He never handed his story over. There was too much of the storyteller in him, too much unleashed Southern song still waiting for the open air.

From the earliest days I can recall, my place was on his lap, touching a hand to his stubbled cheek and listening to his growled narrative, mysterious whispers, and wide-open laughter.

Because of him, I grew to think of the world in terms of the stories it could tell. From my father's moonlit tales of steaming Delta magic to the sweet slow songs of Smokey Robinson, I became addicted to unfolding drama, winding

## Like you and you and you, I'm a storyteller—and so are your children.

narrative threads, the lyricism of simple words. I believed that we all lived in the midst of an ongoing adventure that begged for voice. In my quest for that voice, I found poetry.

Poetry was the undercurrent of every story I heard and read. It was the essence, the bones, and the pulse. I could think of no better way to communicate than with a poem, where pretense is stripped away, leaving only what is beautiful and vital.

Poetry became the way I processed the world. In neon-washed bars, community centers, and bookstores, I breathed out necessary breath, taking the stage and sharing stanzas with strangers, anxious wordsmiths who were also bag boys, day laborers, housekeepers, and cooks. I loved the urgency of their voices and the way they sparked urgency in mine.

So, like you and you and you, I'm a storyteller—and so are your children. I've realized that we only get one life, and I've decided to own mine completely, to celebrate and mourn and lash out and question and believe and argue and explore and love and dismiss and fight on the page, at the front of a classroom, on the stage. No one, no one is authorized to tell that story but you. And if there is shame in that story, you own that shame and you turn it into lesson. If there is darkness in your story, you write toward the light. If there are words you don't want anyone else to hear, you hold those words close. On the other hand, if there is joy threaded throughout that story, you sing it loud enough to rock the rafters. If there is triumph, and there will always be, in some measure, you pull everyone within the sound of your voice, within shouting distance of the page, into that circle of light.

A teacher standing at the front of a classroom is a little bit of religion. It doesn't matter if you are in Portland or Philadelphia or Kentucky or Indianapolis, whether you are overpaid or overlooked, whether your students soar thru their AP classes or stumble through single-syllable words, whether your school is five wings or five stories, it doesn't matter if the buildings are drab and fallen and surrounded by a dying neighborhood or glittering and expansive enough to brag its own zip code, it doesn't matter whether your students are colored like snow or sand or soil. For every minute you stand before them, *you* are the beacon, the whole of possibility, the keeper of the second throat. Like it or not, you are often the first chapter in the story they're writing with their lives. Their parents taught them to speak. Now you must teach them to speak aloud, to keep on speaking, to scream and to sing.

I am Patricia Ann Smith, the daughter of Annie Pearl Smith and Otis Douglas Smith. I am the story they wrote.

Stop. Say your name aloud.

Now find a way to tell your story. And find a way to introduce all those children who wait for you to that second throat. ■