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KIM COLEMAN FOOTE

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# Mama's Boy

Your ma taught you to hold Colored boys close. Like when your little brother Johnny fell from the oak tree in the yard and busted open his knee. She ordered you girls to finish scrubbing the laundry and dashed over to him. As he howled, she cradled him, cooing, as if he was a sickly calf. You girls exchanged looks.

Whenever you all fell or burned your fingers on the iron or cooking pots, you knew better than to make a peep, unless you wanted her to slap you. Giving you something, as she called it, to really cry about. She said that in life, girls get more pain than boys. Birthing babies was the worst of it, and you'd best better learn to handle it early. You'd likely pop out your first before eighteen.

She also blamed you girls for Johnny's wrongs, especially his stealing. When some of her third husband's cigars went missing, she refused to smell Johnny's mouth. You all told her he'd pestered you that morning, blowing his foul breath at you, and she accused you of theft. The last nice thing she ever bought you girls, the red velvet hair ribbons for Easter, disappeared before you had the chance to wear them. When she found them tied together on a high branch of the oak tree, she whipped you all for it.

It hurt worse, though, when Johnny pilfered your magic rocks. You discovered them arriving to the tobacco field one morning, three perfectly round black stones, which you slipped into the waistband of your dress drying in the yard. Told yourself an owl left them as a reward for you picking so much that season, almost as much as your ma's latest husband, who was four times the size of your twelve-year-old self. No one ever complimented you or your sisters on your work. If anything, your ma and her husbands called you stragglers, and they hmped at your swollen fingers. They said you were the most complainingest pickaninnies that ever existed. When we was youngins, they began. You and your sisters' eyes would meet: when y'all was youngins, y'all was slaves. Johnny, meanwhile, would trail everybody down the rows. Your ma's husbands fussed about him being even lazier, but one look from your ma shut them up.

The evening of the day you found the rocks, you saw Johnny sneaking around the laundry line and just knew. You tackled him, and your ma ran over and knocked you halfway



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across the yard. She screamed: Look at the scratch you put on Johnny's cheek, the rip in his shirt, the rocks you stole from him. Denied you your supper that evening as punishment. At bedtime, after she extinguished the lamps, you could hear her husband arguing with her across the room in their bed. You liked that one the least, with his constant griping and crusty toenails, which your ma assigned you to soak and cut. But that day, he stood up for you, declaring Johnny was going in a bad way. Your ma stayed silent the whole time, like she did whenever her husbands criticized her boy.

Ida, he said, you teaching him to expect whatever he please. That could get him killed, and you know it. And the boy already too soft, crying all the time cuz you let him. You can't protect him from everything.

He volunteered to put some sport on Johnny's behind, and you girls groaned. Your ma's response, as usual, was to pack up the pots and clothes in the morning and leave him. That time, she moved you a county away, back to Alabama to a town called Madrid, where you had to get used to a new landlord, a new crop (cotton this time), new neighbors, a new church, and, eventually, a new husband.

So you girls took to hitting Johnny whenever you could. You didn't want to, he looking so pretty like your ma, with his golden brown skin and bouncing curls. Eyes like river water under sunlight. Dimples that made you wish for pennies to stick in them. He'd make it easier for you to hurt him when he flashed his bare bottom too many times.

You couldn't wait till you were old enough to leave home so you could do things different with your family. You'd marry just one man, and you'd punish your sons and daughters alike. Colored boys should get used to pain, too, you thought, recalling white folks' sneers, their insults. Their night rides and burned crosses. But a year later, around the time the President got shot and some man named Teddy Roosevelt took his place, you saw your first lynching and changed your mind.

It was Mr. Dickens, who sat two rows ahead at church. The place you hated. Whether in Florida or Alabama, the congregations were the same. Everybody side-eyed you and your siblings with whispers loud enough to hear: *Not a one of them look alike. A different pappy, all them.* Mr. Dickens was the best thing about Madrid First Baptist's Sunday service. He would doze through the sermons, sending you all into giggles as his big bald head kept bobbling.

The day of his murder, you and your ma had walked the six miles into Florida to Campbellton, where your ma still knew folks, to sell her lye soap. You spotted Mr. Dickens and one of his sons across the road. They sauntered down the new wooden sidewalk that spanned the bank, Pittman's feed store, Myrick's dry goods, and the post office. They had just caught sight of your ma and were waving when a white woman stormed out of the post office. She whirled around and stepped right into Mr. Dickens, her pretty painted face bouncing off his chest.

The whole street went still, you and your ma included. It must have taken Mr. Dickens mere seconds to stumble off the sidewalk and yank his son after him, and already, several white men surrounded them. The ones who'd been listening to the radio in front of the feed store. One who abandoned his dray cart in the sandy road.

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But it ain't like he could move in time, Ma, you said.

She hissed at you to shut your trap and look away. Snatched your plaits and yanked your face toward her when you didn't. But you'd already seen Mr. Dickens on his knees with his head to the ground, like a dog. Mr. Dickens, the tallest but most soft-spoken man you knew. And you could still hear those white men calling him boy. Dumbass. Nigger. Accusing him of molesting a white woman. Mr. Dickens, the widow who never made eyes at your ma like other men, including the white ones. His son pleaded for them not to take his daddy away, but you heard a scuffle. You snuck a look in time to see those white men hoist Mr. Dickens into the dray cart and drive off.

That evening, you and your ma were near the end of your walk back home when your lanterns caught the reddish brown puddle at the roadside. You raised your lights higher, and your ma's rough palm was crushing your eyes, but not fast enough. You saw the dangling feet. One wearing Mr. Dickens' brown boot. The other, a snaking line of blood.

You started to understand why your ma kept Johnny, her only boy, looking like a girl for as long as she did, with his bushy hair and flour-sack smocks at thirteen, when he could have worn knickers. White men might call a Colored man "boy" into his ancient years, but once he hit twelve or so, they considered him man enough to take his life for any trifle. The day Johnny's voice deepened, your ma must have worried each time she sent him off the farm for errands by himself. It must have been like pushing him from the nest and into a fire-pit, hoping dumb luck would get him burnt quick, and only on the tips of his wings.

He would have no such luck. At sixteen, he stole a piglet from Mr. Register's farm down the hill. As a joke, he said, hooting: White folks think we only be likin watermelon and chicken, so nobody gon suspect me.

That was the first time you saw your ma yell at him. She released the pig by the nearby brook and it found its way home, but Mr. Register accused one of his Colored tenant's sons for the theft. Johnny stopped laughing when word came that Mr. Register had that boy of seven bullwhipped, as though it was slavery times. That boy also insisted he saw Johnny carry off the pig. Mr. Register drove up to your yard in that brand-new Model T of his, stirring up a cloud of red dust. He was with two other white men, both bearing rifles. Your ma clung so hard to Johnny that they nearly put her eye out, ripping him away.

Days later, you all had just finished supper when you heard hoofbeats followed by Mr. McKinney's whistle in the yard. Mr. McKinney, deputy sheriff of Jackson County, Florida, and proud member of the Ku Klux Klan, who liked to call on your ma between husbands. Johnny was his son, as tongues wagged. That had to be why Johnny got sentenced to a chain gang instead of the rope.

You girls watched through the doorway as your ma strode up to Mr. McKinney's giant gray mare. He removed his hat and leaned down. Whatever he said made your ma shriek and collapse. She didn't share the news until the next morning, after you girls had taken turns through the night applying gin-soaked compresses to her head. Staring up the eaves, eyes pink but parched of tears, she told you that the wagon cage where Johnny slept had

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caught afire. He'd perished, along with the three others chained to him. For the longest time after, you couldn't look at a cooking fire without hearing him screaming for your ma.

When you met your husband, Jim, two years later, you prayed every time you laid together that he wouldn't give you a boy. The Devil granted your nightmare with the second birth. As your baby Jebbie wailed in your arms for milk, you could only think of Johnny, and not the bothersome Johnny of your growing-up days. The Johnny who died before becoming a man.

Like your ma, you took to dressing Jebbie like Verna and the two girls who followed him. You worried with every bite of food he took, which seemed to make him grow an inch taller every day. Soon he'd be towering over you like Jim, who made you worry, too. You were relieved when the local sheriff put out a notice for a "tall nigger," because it spurred Jim, along with a number of lanky kinfolk and friends, to escape to the North. It was even more welcome news when he sent for you and the children a few months later. After your train pulled out of Washington and the conductor said Colored people could sit wherever they wanted, you smiled, thinking Jebbie would finally be safe from white men. But it wasn't white men he'd need to fear.

Jim wasn't the same man who left Alabama. In New Jersey, he brought home more money than ever but was unhappy, he told you. Yes, he could afford to rent a house in Vauxhall on a short quiet street called Waldorf—a narrow but spacious house that had a bedroom for you both and a separate one for the children, gas lighting and a pot-bellied stove, and three floors, counting the basement, which had a toilet that flushed. Yes, he could take you and the children to the picture show once a month. Yes, the children could go to a school that was just a half-mile walk away and miss classes to plant or harvest some crop. But his jobs in New Jersey's steel mills and factories lasted just a few months, sometimes days. He and other Colored men like him, he said, were nothing but fill-ins for white men who couldn't work. The ones who fell sick or who refused to show up—their way of forcing the bosses to pay them more. As for you, he said, you had to get a job to help make ends meet, and all the North saw fit for you and other Colored women to do was to cook and clean for white folks.

In between jobs, he took to drinking. Developed a temper. Took it out on Jebbie with his shaving belt for the littlest thing. Said the same things your ma's husbands used to say about Johnny. He was too soft. He cried too much. You hovered too much. Jim claimed the beatings would make Jebbie a man. The North, he said, was better for Colored men, but they were still losing their lives if they fought back. A Colored man who failed to handle life's blows would surely see the grave before his time.

Jebbie wasn't getting stronger, though. If anything, he shrank. He cried even more. Developed a stammer. You didn't hug him like your ma would have, but you weren't used to seeing a little boy hurt under your roof. So you often jumped between him and Jim. You

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weren't used to being beaten by a man either; your ma didn't let her husbands discipline you girls. So you attacked Jim like you would have your sisters. He'd never seen that viciousness in you, and the terror that sometimes flashed in his eyes emboldened you to fight until you drew blood.

You also took to giving Jebbie extra attention. If your employer passed along fruit and candies for the children, you gave most of it to him. You could sense the girls getting jealous, but they had no reason to feel that way. You never punished them, after all, for Jebbie's transgressions.

Jebbie repaid you, too, the day Jim went too far. Jebbie had back-talked him at supper because Jim yelled at you. When he made Jebbie kneel on the floor and started to beat him, all you could see was gentle Mr. Dickens and those white men circling him. You understood then why your ma up and deserted any husband who threatened to do the same with her boy. It wasn't about toughening them up. It was preparing them for death.

You ran to the basement and started breaking the liquor bottles Jim kept stored, crate by crate. Next thing you knew, Jim had you on your back against the wet floor and shards of glass, strangling you. You saw that shaving belt come around his neck, then were shocked to see your sweet, sweet Jebbie standing over him. It didn't kill Jim; the consumption already eating his lungs would do that a few weeks later. But you never forgot how your boy tried to save you.

You kept your promise of having one husband, and your neighbors were surprised you didn't remarry. Already got a man of the house, you'd think. Don't need two.

Indeed, Jebbie did a man's duty. He was only ten when Jim died, but he got a job as a paperboy on weekends. Two years later, he was delivering every morning before school as well. He'd found a broken bike in the trash and fixed it with spare parts he spent weeks hunting for. You would smile to see him rolling it into the yard, waving his dollars if he saw you at the window. He would count them out slow and proud on the kitchen table for you. When Black Tuesday came, he quit school. He would have been the first of your children to graduate from high school. Your longtime dreams of him becoming a doctor were dashed, but the work he found helped support the family. Later, you learned that doctor training cost money none of you had, anyway.

For the first time since you moved into the house on Waldorf Place, there was little yelling and fighting, except your youngest daughter and Jim's favorite, Rosine. She couldn't keep a job for long because she liked mouthing off at her employers. Which she blamed on everything except her love of beer, just as she blamed all her troubles on the world. Seemed to blame you for Jim's death, too.

Jebbie, on the other hand, worked hard no matter what employment he found, whether it was the odd jobs through the WPA or the trash collection position he eventually found. Soon you saw that Jim was right about the North. Jebbie complained about not finding

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anything better, not getting extra pay, even as his bosses praised his work. He wanted to earn more money, he said, so you wouldn't have to work anymore.

He took to hanging out several evenings at Palladino's, Vauxhall's version of a down-home jook joint. You knew you shouldn't have walked over there looking for him, but all you could visualize was Jim and his drinking. You were also sure Jebbie would find a girl and leave you, and no decent girls were to be had at anybody's Palladino's. There would be those like Rosine, and you wouldn't stand for an adult living in your household without contributing. Or those with dreams too big, like Verna, who you'd caught sneaking into the kitchen window early one morning when she was seventeen. She'd gone to New York City to dance and party, she said after you whipped her, because New Jersey men were too small-time. Then there were those fast girls like Bertha, the daughter of your closest friend in Vauxhall, who you caught touching Jebbie's privates in the basement when they were children.

Inside that loud, smoky tavern, you found Jebbie at the bar, surrounded by a small crowd, and recognized some of his friends. Next to him was Rosine, married by then and thankfully out of your house. Her bartender husband was pushing more beer bottles at them. When you realized they were having a drinking contest, you charged up to them. Yelled at Jebbie to bring his ass home. Heard the men around you snicker as Jebbie hung his head and stumbled off the barstool.

Your feeling of triumph didn't last long. After some time, you noticed he wasn't speaking to you. He only responded when spoken to, and then mostly in grunts. You went to bed feeling sick, praying he would find a girl like his sister Alma.

At eighteen, she took to trying to hug you in the morning before you left for work—the time of day you felt the most evil and probably looked it, too. You swatted her away every time. You weren't sure where she got the idea because you never hugged anybody. Then she told you she'd met her sweetheart. The first real embrace she managed with you was on her wedding day, the day she moved out. When she came back to the house on visits with her husband, they'd be holding hands and pecking so often it was like they were at the altar again. Alma didn't take any mess from him, though. You saw many times how she could freeze laughter in his throat with a glance. Of course, you didn't know what happened behind closed doors, but you assumed Alma's tall brickhouse frame could subdue him at home, too. That's what you wanted for Jebbie: a strong, smart girl who could treat him like he was special but know when to say no, like you did.

The Devil again sent you a nightmare, one you couldn't have guessed at, until your friend Lucy invited you and Jebbie to her parlor. Lucy and her daughter Bertha sat across from you, and you grew increasingly nervous as Bertha licked her lips and grinned at Jebbie. When Lucy told you that Bertha was expecting Jebbie's child, it was all you could do not to leap over and throttle her. That girl had stolen your boy's innocence, corrupted his mind. She next convinced him to move out when there was plenty of space at the house, you and Verna being the only ones left by then. You did get him to come to you for his dinners,

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though, and you were excited a few months into the marriage when he told you Bertha had walked out on him. Your mouth dropped open when he said it was because he'd kicked her in the stomach.

Yeah, Muh, he said, barely able to look at you, I know her time almost here, but she called me home early, calling herself surprising me, and almost burnt down the place cooking. I couldn't stop myself.

Then you wanted to slap him when he told you what did stop him: Bertha's little sister, Nell, pulling a switchblade on him. You lost your temper enough to call him any number of so-and-so's, asking yourself why he couldn't have waited for Nell to grow up. If he'd married her instead, you wouldn't have lost your friend, whose appearance now filled you with rage over Bertha. You wouldn't have had evil thoughts about Bertha losing that baby. It was your first grandchild, but it would also be part of a girl you despised, and that baby was the only reason Jebbie married her.

The only other thing you persuaded him to do, in the end, was to move back home, but it took a few years, and by then, Bertha was on child number four. With her under your roof came sounds the house hadn't known since Jim died: the baritone shouting, followed by fists slapping flesh, thuds, furniture crashing. Unlike Jim, Jebbie did it in the privacy of their bedroom upstairs. And unlike you, Bertha had tearful apologies.

You had no respect for a girl like that. It was New Jersey, not the South, and Jebbie wasn't some cracker with crooked laws. When Jim beat you for defending your boy, you were never sorry for fighting back.

To make matters worse, Jebbie refused for Bertha to work, so you had to see her swollen dumb-cow face whenever you were home, including your days off. You harangued Jebbie to let her find a job and for her shift to preferably be opposite yours. He didn't listen, and the babies kept coming. You encouraged him to philander. That, he did do. His main side hustle, you heard through gossip around Vauxhall, was petite like you and Bertha. But she carried a pistol in her purse and drank men under the table and could bless them out just as good. It wasn't enough to make Jebbie leave his wife, though.

The day you spoke the word *divorce*, arguing that you could raise the children yourself and do a better job, Jebbie raised his hand like he wanted to strike you. You flinched and he backed off, hanging his head. After a moment, he mumbled that Bertha had put roots on him, that he wanted to leave her but couldn't. Everything suddenly made sense, and you realized what you had to do. Bertha would leave your house, even if you had to drag her out.

Folks said she was pregnant and that she lost a baby from what you did to her. That girl wasn't pregnant, just fat from lazing around all day eating. Bertha and Jebbie couldn't have afforded another child, anyway. They could barely afford the five they had. And whatever that girl might have lost was far less than what she almost turned Jebbie into: your boy, on his way to becoming a man like his daddy. 🐎



FROM THE  
*Horse's Mouth*

a conversation about privilege,  
agency, and power with  
Kim Coleman Foote



Photo by Wen Photography

**IHLR:** We're so excited to speak to you about your story, "Mama's Boy," which we admire for so many reasons. It is written as if a letter or a story to someone about their own life, perhaps even someone being told the story of their own life, but the feeling for the reader is something closer to a second-person telling. Discuss your decisions around point of view and what you hope they elucidate for the reader.

**COLEMAN FOOTE:** I first encountered the second-person viewpoint in Nurrudin Farah's *Maps* about twenty years ago, and I found the experience so disorienting that I gave up reading early on. But, a few years ago, when I began writing about the generations of alcoholism in my family, starting with my great-grandmother Celia, using "you" felt right: it reinforced the feeling of Celia and her two descendants being trapped in a cycle.

"Mama's Boy" comes from a collection of stories fictionalizing my family's Great Migration journey. Celia, whose presence hovers like Olive Kitteridge's throughout, is not a likeable character, despite the resilience and strength she exudes following her husband's untimely death. She coddles her son and abuses her daughters, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren. "Mama's Boy" was my attempt to make sense of how she might have made sense of

her actions, and "you" still felt most appropriate. The third-person POV felt too distant. The first person might have made her seem even more off-putting. Because the second-person voice speaks directly to Celia as well as the reader, I think it obliges readers to empathize with her "choices," even as her reasoning becomes disturbing near the end of the story.

I delved into Celia's childhood in the story because my goal for the collection was to discover the roots of my ancestors' behavior as adults; the major characters are all seen at some point as children for that reason. As much as I loathe what Celia did to my grandmother, imagining her childhood suddenly made her treatment of Jebbie and later Bertha feel logical and inevitable, notwithstanding how destructive. Because what is a "choice" if one acts from a place of brainwashing or trauma? Determining blame becomes complicated—is it the person who did the horrible deed, or is it (also) their environment? And what of the people who created that environment?

**IHLR:** This story features multigenerational narratives (sometimes trauma). It's about the quest to "do something different" from the previous generation but often replicating the cycle nonetheless. Talk about this as a theme in the piece.

**COLEMAN FOOTE:** This reflects my interest in psychology and how the mind processes negative experiences. It can take a great deal of self-reflection, dedication, and feedback from others before we might start to recognize detrimental patterns within our families, let alone try to change them. While Celia was resolute as a child about the type of mothering she refused to replicate, her later fears—along with a lack of alternate examples—drove her to do it unwittingly. She perceived threats to her son as he became an adult, but they harkened back to very real and traumatizing ones: the senseless imprisonment and death of her brother and the equally senseless murder of Mr. Dickens.

**IHLR:** How important is place to this piece? And how does migration/movement dictate what is possible for these characters?

**COLEMAN FOOTE:** The South/North divide in the late 1800s/early 1900s is vital to the story. At that time, black people in the United States lived under one American flag and yet lived in two very different nations—one in the South, where they couldn't vote, where justice removed her blinders and labeled them guilty from birth, and where their lives—not to mention their deaths—did not matter. Richard Wright's memoir, *Black Boy*, which I read as I was finishing the collection, captures quite viscerally the persistent terror of living in that "other country," along with the pervasive and infuriating sense of loss: the many dreams deferred then squashed.

And yet, the North wasn't quite the promised land that folks were calling it. Langston Hughes's signature poem, "Harlem," wasn't about Dixie, after all. Opportunities up North were better, but black folks were treated barely better than the not-yet citizens streaming into the country around the same time.

But still—what an experience it must have been in the North, to sit where you—here I go

again, trying to draw "you all" in—wanted on public transportation, to walk down a sidewalk in peace, to walk *upright* in peace. To meet the eyes of people with lighter skin than yours without fear of insult, physical punishment, or worse. To get addressed by those same people as equals, as "Miss" or "Mr." To no longer dread that a misstep could get you sentenced to a chain gang (if you were lucky). To be seen as a fellow human being. I imagine that for some black folks, the personal transformation in the North was akin to that of someone escaping an abusive relationship: slow and tentative. And because the South was so limiting—limiting choices, limiting opportunity, limiting basic human development and growth, limiting life itself, in the case of Mr. Dickens—I suspect that some people's ability to imagine possibilities, better choices and solutions and ways out, suffered even after migrating. And black people in America today are still living in limiting environments, so. . . .

**IHLR:** Tell us about the importance of writing a story about this particular time?

**COLEMAN FOOTE:** Some of my fellow Americans continue to cling to a peephole view of America's past, a past where life wasn't so bad; America used to be great, in fact! Or they say that things like slavery and segregation happened so long ago—can't we just move past it as a society and forget it? These are the folks who get outraged and confused when they learn about Americans today who regard symbols of American patriotism with disdain, and their reactions are quite understandable, given their conception of history.

"Mama's Boy"—and my whole collection, in fact—is my "see how great it was for someone who didn't have white skin back then." See how America cheated many of its so-called citizens and how that has impacted their descen-

dants through today. Feel the injustice that has been allowed within this so-called democracy, through today.

**IHLR:** In the story, both Johnny and eventually Jebbie are dressed as girls in order to avoid getting into the types of trouble/danger they might face as boys. Can you discuss this type of generational wisdom and how culture affects the stories we are told?

**COLEMAN FOOTE:** The idea of dressing boys like girls, which melds with the story's focus on masculinity and emasculation, was a figment of my imagination, though I wouldn't be surprised to find historical evidence of it having been done. I generated the scenario with survival in mind—the ways in which people get creative when their existence is threatened, whether they're black people living in an oppressive environment or otherwise. I'm also fascinated by how coping mechanisms can, ironically, be both toxic as well as a means of survival.

**IHLR:** In the climactic scene at the end of the story, the "you" makes a choice to kick Bertha out of the house despite what harm may come to her. Discuss this decision's potential impact on Jebbie (meaning the way that Johnny and Jebbie's fates seem intertwined/mirrored until the mother intervenes) and on Bertha.

**COLEMAN FOOTE:** Celia, unlike her mother, was able to rescue her son from a threat. Viewing her behavior toward Bertha in such basic terms, the story becomes one of triumph for Celia, considering that her brother's fate was death. Conversely, Celia herself has caused death: Jebbie and Bertha's marriage, and, subsequently, Bertha's relationship with her children. Jebbie comes through it all alive, yes, but at the expense of his sense of manhood, adulthood, and self-reliance—tragically, the very qualities

so many black men sought when fleeing the South.

**IHLR:** In closing, I'm wondering if you can speak to representations of black trauma within this piece and across literary works more broadly. What are some of your concerns when writing these struggles, and what are some of the responsibilities?

**COLEMAN FOOTE:** Black folks across many media outlets have been expressing weariness over black pain depicted in creative works, especially in light of the murders of unarmed black people during recent years. While "Mama's Boy" and my collection as a whole touch on slavery, segregation, discrimination, and intergenerational trauma, let me be clear: I find no joy in writing black pain. I'm drawn to marginalized histories, with the conviction that history repeats itself when these narratives—along with the injustices contained within them—are banished from the official record. And I can't write about poor and working-class black folks in the past without acknowledging the scars this country has given them.

I myself have no patience for black trauma porn. These are the stories where black people's whole lives seem to be defined by suffering, where they continually take abuse with little or no resistance. I find resistance exciting, a testament to a very human craving for betterment. At the same time, my writing highlights maladaptive behaviors and thinking that have become a part of black culture, and that are the result of generations of enslavement and oppression. I bring these to light in my work, along with the toxic ways history replays both in society at large and within families, in hopes that more people will see, question, and try to stop these cycles.

—BROOK McCLURG, column editor