Mixed-Blood Stew

JEWELL PARKER RHODES

It was an old document. Rough parchment, yellowed and withered. I was all of ten, on the threshold of womanhood, digging in my mother's closet, trying to find clues about why my mother abandoned me when I was an infant, why she returned to claim me when I was nine. On this sweltering summer day, I found a

JEWELL PARKER RHODES is the Virginia G. Piper Chair in Creative Writing and artistic director of the Virginia G. Piper Center in Creative Writing at Arizona State University. She is the author of two writing guides, *Free Within Ourselves: Fiction Lessons for Black Authors* and *The African American Guide to Writing and Publishing Nonfiction.* She has written three novels: *Voodoo Dreams*, *Magic City*, and *Douglass' Women*. *Douglass' Women* was the winner of the 2003 American Book Award, the Black Caucus of the American Library Association Award, the 2003 PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Award, and was a finalist for the PEN Center USA Award in Fiction and for the Hurston-Wright Legacy Award. She has received a Yaddo Creative Writing Fellowship, the National Endowment of the Arts Award in Fiction, and several distinguished teaching and mentoring awards.

treasure trove of documents—birth certificates, Social Security cards with various names, paycheck stubs, and blurred photographs of my mother with strangers. But I knew I'd discovered something special when I uncovered the fragile sheet sandwiched between cardboard and tissue paper.

SLAVE AUCTION

Various goods and animals to be auctioned,
including one healthy male, a woman (good cook), and child.

WRIGHT PLANTATION

Respectable offers only

"What are you doing?"

My hands trembled, but rather than retreating, I asked, "What this?"

"I don't like you going through my things." She took the package from my hand and laid it on the bed.

"That your family?" I asked. Of course they were my family, too. But Mother had been gone so long I couldn't help thinking of her as separate from me.

Almost whispering, Mother traced the dulled letters with her fingers. "The good cook. She was my great-grandmother. The man, her husband. The child, my grandmother. Master Wright sold them like cattle. When slavery ended, my folks claimed Master's name because they were his kin."

Kin, I knew, was a code word for rape. Race-mixing. Miscegenation. The child was mulatto. The "healthy male" who raised her wasn't her father. Nonetheless, the small family, lucky to be sold together, took Wright's name and created another, darker limb of his family tree.

For a brief moment, I thought Mother would slap me. Or ground me. Or scream, making me cower, cover my ears.

"This is mine," she said, and layered the auction sheet beneath tissue paper and taped the cardboard shut.

But I knew she was wrong—it was mine, too—part of my blood. I reached out to give her a hug, but Mother pulled away.

"Don't touch my things again."

After Mother left I had a vision of a handsome black man and woman riding on a wagon perch with a yellow-brown girl between them. When the child's hand clasped a parent's, did she ever wonder about her lighter skin? About the faces stirring inside her blood?

Mother had the auction sheet framed but never hung it. Until her death it remained shelved in a closet—a buried reminder of what my mother considered a secret. What was worth hiding from neighbors' and her children's eyes. Wipe away roots. Mother created herself full-blown, sprung from the head of Zeus. Mother was all charm, respectability; in her mind her people arrived on the *Mayflower,* never anchored belowdecks in a slave ship's hold.

I'd always known mysterious people were stirring in my blood.

During the nine years of my mother's absence, my paternal grandmother raised me. Raised me in the A.M.E. Methodist Church and in a community with its own special rainbow. Red-toned Miss Chalmers, sandy-faced Willie, black-beyond-midnight Reverend, and ivory-skinned Mrs. Jackson. Dozens of words described our myriad colors: *Chocolate. Coffee. Café au lait. High yellow. Indigo. Bronze.* Street-corner boys whistled at the parade of sepia girls. Proud churchwomen declared our deacons "fine, righteous black men." And on Easter Sundays, with pastels adorning black and brown bodies, I knew each and every one of us was beautiful.

"African-American people, like all people, be rich within themselves," my grandmother said. We grandkids—my sister, Tonie, my cousin Aleta, and I—sitting on porch steps, sucking on salted ice or feeding grass to lightning bugs trapped inside a jar, would listen as Grandmother, her voice rising and falling like a sermon, told us tales of ourselves.

"We come from Georgia. Before that—Africa. White folks didn't understand there be thousands of tribes. Each with its own history. Slavers thought anybody with black skin be ignorant, be blank slates for them to write upon and breed. Foolishness."

"Hun-hunh," we testified, drawing people with white chalk, printing our names in block letters. If it was especially hot and humid, we'd pretend we were in church and fan ourselves with newspapers folded like accordions.

"Once black folks could fly. They came from a special tribe with magic words. One day when Master worked them too hard, beat them too long, they played their bodies like drums. Foot-stomping. Hand-clapping. Chest- and thigh-beating. Sent the message, 'Tonight. We fly.'

"Come midnight, when day blends into the next, they strapped their babies on their backs, whispered their magic, and lifted off the ground like crows. Blackbirds in the sky. Sailing high across the fields and above the seas."

"How come we couldn't fly?" I asked.

"Somebody needed to tell the tale. Like I be telling you. Like one day you be telling your children."

Tonie giggled. "I ain't marrying."

I elbowed my sister, declaring, "I'll tell."

Tonie rolled her eyes, stuck out her tongue.

Grandmother laughed, patting my back, making me feel special.

"White folks used to say one drop of black blood makes you a

slave. Made it a law, too. Sheer foolishness. Pepper in the pot makes everything taste better. Can't use just salt."

"You saying we a stew?"

"Yes. The best kind. Mixed-blood stew."

Then Grandmother, noticing the sky filled with twinkling stars and a crescent moon, shooed us to bed and dreams of clouds cradling us. Dreams of ancestors flying, filling a pot with laughter and love.

Grandmother's tales were better than my mother's silence. Cross-racial diversity didn't imply any shame, only grace.

One summer Grandmother blessed us with a vacation trip to Georgia. We grandkids frolicked, skipped across grass, marveling at homes made of wood rather than brick. Marveling at one-story houses with acres of pecan and orange trees. Our three-story home had an L-shaped yard of concrete and just enough dirt for a rosebush, which rarely bloomed.

Blood memories of that Southern visit still stir me. I remember glimpsing my great-grandmother, half Seminole, half black, sitting in the middle of her bed, wearing a white flannel gown. She was so frail I thought her a ghost. So silent I thought her mute.

I stood in the doorway watching her brush, over and over again, her long strands of black silk. Hair so long she could sit on it. Hair so dark it gleamed like polished rock.

For three days I watched her with each setting sun. Finally I asked, "Why does she do it, Grandmother? What for?"

"She's afraid water will make her catch cold. So she brushes away the dirt. Stroke by stroke."

"Hmmm," I murmured, my eyes sparkling.

"Don't you think it," answered Grandmother, knowing I dreaded shampoos and the hot comb pressing my kinky hair flat.

Grandfather, not to be outdone by Grandmother's line, had his own stories to tell.

"Seminole be all right. But I got Choctaw and Irish in me."

Sunday afternoons he'd be in his familiar spot, sitting at the head of the dining room table, smoking a pipe and sipping Iron City beer. He'd grab anyone who passed by and tell his ancestral stories.

"In the twenties, Irish come to the Pittsburgh steel mills. Stood the heat 'like niggers,' some say. I say they stood the heat like men who appreciated an extra dollar at the end of the day." Then he'd jab his pipe. "Negroes got fifty cents.

"My Irish granddad, nearly bald, freckled all over, fell in love with my grandmother, who had some white in her from a generation before. She had Choctaw, too. Warrior blood. My grandmother's mama already had several of Master's children. One year, to spite him, she got pregnant by an Indian. Master was fit to be tied."

"So what all that blood makes me?"

He laughed, his mouth wide like a neighing horse. "Someone smart. Someone with the best of the best."

"Oh," I exhaled while Grandfather slapped his leg, his laughter ending in a fit of coughing.

As decades passed, our ethnic group kept changing, shifting, melding into more beautiful and varied gumbos, mixed-blood stews. Each marriage, each baby born, yielded new blood.

White Americans insisted our bloodlines were uncomplicated. "One drop of black blood" had historical resonance.

In contemporary terms "one drop" meant bigots and Klansmen, thickheaded policemen and ignorant folk could kick, beat, lynch, verbally abuse you, regardless. There was no measure for diversity.

It was always white versus black.

Even when whites confronted a technically Anglo/Irish/Choctaw/Cherokee/African girl. A nigger was a nigger was a nigger . . . even when she, like me, was an assistant professor at the University of Maryland walking home from educating young minds, enjoying the sunshine and startled into fury at being called a nigger by the frat-house boys.

I always wanted to know the bloodlines of my tormentors. How white was their whiteness? What secrets lived in their veins? Did delving into generations yield Asian, Pacific Islander, Hispanic, and African, too? And if we went back to the beginning, the early dawn of our species, wasn't Lucy their mother, too?

In 1954 I was born and Emmett Till, fourteen, was murdered for speaking slang ("Bye-bye, baby") to an adult white woman. His mother insisted his coffin be open so everybody could see the battering of her baby boy.

Till's death sparked the birth of the civil rights movement. African-Americans demanded justice. Unity was our strength. But like wily and gifted tricksters, proud marchers knew they embodied "the other," embodied, in each and every one of them, some drop, *one drop*, of Anglo-American blood.

Even a child knows there is no pure color. Everything comes from a mix. And like artists African-Americans have always embraced the mix, even when some of our blood mirrored our tormentors'.

Living in my grandmother's house, I often dreamed about the faces inside my blood. As a child, stepping onto the bathtub rim, leaning against the bathroom sink, I'd stare into the mirror, pinching my skin. Freckles sprinkled across my nose—Irish?

Black, slightly slanted eyes—Seminole? Hair curled tight about my face—African? For hours I tried to account for how each part of me revealed the light and dark shadows in my blood.

In school I learned about Dick and Jane (who came to America from nowhere) and read all the tales about white families, rural and urban, rich and poor, living happily ever after in white houses with white picket fences. Fences that kept children like me out. Literature, I had discovered, was only about white lives. I smiled, kept reading nevertheless, for I knew my own joy and happiness being a brown girl raised in my grandmother and grandfather's house. One afternoon after my eighth birthday, I passed the dining room table. A newspaper cutting lay in the center of it.

"That's your father's daddy," said Grandmother, coming to stand behind me.

"That's Grandfather Thornton?"

"No. I was married before. This is your father's daddy."

"He's white."

"He's dead."

A sad-eyed man seemed to stare right through me. He was in a naval uniform, handsome, with a high forehead like mine and a squared-off chin like Daddy's. Name given: "Lieutenant J. Parker." Bold headline: "Served Valiantly in the War." Plain print: "Age 56, survived by his wife and four kids."

"My grandfather's white?"

"Or else so light he passed. It wasn't clear. One time he told me he was French-Canadian. Another time he said he was colored. Another time, Southern white."

I exhaled, excited by the revelation.

Grandmother turned away from the photo but left it on the dining room table. I could see her down the short hallway, opening our freezer and pulling out Grandfather's (should I still call

him that?) white shirts, all balled up and half frozen. "They iron better this way," Grandmother always told me.

I watched her lumber down the hallway, then into the living room to set up her ironing station. She turned the TV to the afternoon movies. Both Grandmother and I liked to watch Bette Davis in *Jezebel*, Bob Hope in *Going Down to Rio*, and Lon Chaney in *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*.

Steam hissing from the flatiron, I asked, "Why you stopped being married to him—the other man?"

"In a way I didn't. He left. Said a sailor couldn't be an officer unless he be white. So he chose white."

"He passed?"

"Maybe."

"Did you divorce him?"

"Didn't have the money. I had two kids to raise. Your grandfather—the real one, your Grandfather Thornton—and I jumped the broom."

I puffed my cheeks out. This was better than the movies.

"His other wife. She white?"

"Yes." Grandmother turned the shirt over. "And his kids, all white. They live about thirty miles from here."

"No lie."

"Watch your mouth."

"I'm sorry."

Grandmother paused. "Sorry be as sorry does." The shirt was near to burning. "The white Parkers don't want to know you," she said flatly, and began moving the iron back and forth again.

Chin cupped in my palms, I tried to imagine the white Parkers who'd never lay claim to me or my father. That year, 1961, Daddy went to court to prove he was the eldest son. He wanted the flag from his father's military coffin. He wanted his white brothers and sisters to see and acknowledge him.

Much later I found out Lieutenant Parker died of liver failure. Drank himself to death.

When my mother came to claim me, I didn't want to go. But since she and my father were trying marriage one more time, I had little choice. We were the only African-American family in a suburban white community. The community was fine. But Mother, unfortunately, was skittish that we'd seem too rowdy, which meant, in her mind, too colored. The first night, she laid down rules, soft yet insistent commands about propriety, about being pretty in a dull, not-flamboyant way. "Be charming. Be gracious," she said.

At sixteen I grew rebellious. I was both a hippie and a power-to-the-people child. *"Times, they are a-changing"* . . . *"Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud."*

I painted my bedroom red and black, hung fishnets from the ceiling, propped African spears and masks against the wall. A strobe light flickered in the corner, making every movement seem like two. Jimi Hendrix and Jefferson Airplane blared from my stereo. I was celebrating my bloodlines, and for me, a black flower child was not a contradiction. I wore a bushy Afro and leopard prints with love beads and a lei. My Huey Newton print scared my mother more than the incense. My support of the Olympians' black-power salute frightened her more than the potential of my doing hard drugs at a pool party in a neighbor's backyard.

Mother kicked me out of the house. "Go," she said; Father said nothing. I flew from California back to Pittsburgh, to my birthplace, to Grandmother and Grandfather Thornton.

I think now that my mother couldn't accept herself. It was as though her shame that her family came from a plantation, that her grandmother was a mixed child of rape, still unsettled her. There was no lens to make the past less frightening, less upsetting to her sense of decorum. She wasn't an Uncle Tom or a white wannabe. Rather, she was proud of her racial heritage, but her pride was bound up with the etiquette of a white world that was a figment of the fifties. Like Booker T. Washington, Mother thought if she worked hard enough, adopted the tastes of white middle-class culture, then she would be accepted. This desire for acceptance was her weakness, an insidious insecurity, an illogical belief that what she was—a mixed-blood New World African-American—was something to be ashamed of.

I say what she was was just fine. A special mix of humanity shaped my mother as it shaped and continues to shape us all. Mother's fears wouldn't let her embrace all the recesses and twists of her blood. Instead she established categories that contradicted themselves: Being black was fine; being a descendant of slaves was not fine. Being lovely like Lena Horne was fine; being descended from a white master wasn't. If she could she would have suppressed half the blood that made her.

Sometimes I dreamed Mother and I were sitting on the bed, side by side, reflected in a wardrobe mirror. "See," she'd say to me. "You look just like me."

And I would nod, saying, "There's plenty of good ghosts in our blood."

"Yes," she'd answer, and just like in a child's (a Native American's?) ritual of bonding, we'd prick our fingers, press them flesh to flesh, blood to blood, swearing, "Always." Swearing our ties couldn't be unbound. But I woke knowing Mother would have preferred purity. Being of mixed blood was too complicated for her. From either racial side, she thought she was being judged,

could never be at ease. Her behavior became more and more rigid. Friendships, familial relations became a trial.

Mother surfaced periodically in my life, most memorably when she questioned the wisdom of my marrying a white man (Lucy's pale child from the North: British, Norwegian, and Scotch-Irish). "Think of the children," she said.

True to form, Mother did not call or write to congratulate me when I gave birth to a daughter. Nor did she call or write to congratulate me when I gave birth to a son.

One child light. One child dark.

My greatest fear is that one day someone will shout out to my son, "Nigger, what are you doing with that white girl?"

In the meantime I tell them to celebrate rivers, the roar of people, faces, histories stirring in their blood.

My census category is African-American. It always has been. Yet this category doesn't deny all the people in my blood, my genes, bubbling beneath my skin. I pass it all on. That's what Grandmother taught me.

In the 2000 census, millions of Americans checked more than one ethnic category. Native American. Hispanic. Anglo. Pacific Islander.

I think this is a good thing. All blood runs red.

Jewell Parker Rhodes *on "Mixed-Blood Stew"*

I write historical fiction taking grains of truth and embellishing them with my imagination. Through fiction, I try to present the

"emotional truth" of what it felt like to be a nineteenth-century voodoo queen in New Orleans, what it felt like to be swept up in the violence of the Tulsa race riot of 1921, what it felt like to be the white mistress and black wife of the great abolitionist and ex-slave Frederick Douglass. All my fictions have "me" inside them, but none of my fiction has ever been able to capture the facts, details, and emotional truth of my childhood. My first novel, *Family Lies*, was my creative dissertation at Carnegie Mellon University, written in 1979. This novel is essentially about my childhood and family. It is bleak and, essentially, a failed fiction.

It's taken me more than twenty years to begin mining my childhood memories again, and only through creative nonfiction have I gained a measure of satisfaction. Somehow the announcement of these memories as "truth," as nonfiction, liberates me in ways no fiction ever has. Yet I'm fully aware that my creative nonfiction is distorted by the fictional lies of memory and perception.

Trying to write about myself and my family within the context of plot didn't reveal the myriad layers of meaning in my life. Creative nonfiction, on the other hand, allows me to scratch at emotional sores with depth, passion, and, I think, with a full awareness that I'm still searching to understand my life and the interconnections between my grandmother, my mother, myself, and my children, and my children's children-to-be.

"Mixed-Blood Stew" wasn't easy writing; nonetheless, the process was deeply satisfying. It means something when the hurt child can put herself front and center inside the tale, and through memory, the passage of time, weave a bit of healing. Maybe that's why this particular creative nonfiction is so satisfying to me—it means I've survived. It signifies hope. I belong in the world and the world is alive—inside me.

Why I Ride

JANA RICHMAN

The fear begins to subside as soon as I'm out of town. The speed of the open road should cause greater fear, but the whir of the engine lulls me into a false sense of safety. A slight vibration from the foot pegs seeps into my toes, travels though my legs and around the curve of my butt, settling in my lower back. I squeeze the grips to send another tremble through my hands and into my elbows to dwell in my chest and shoulders. The unseasonably cool Arizona summer morning air slips up my sleeves and twirls inside my zipped jacket. I pop up my face shield, take the blast full on my face; sunglasses flutter with the force. The wind enters at my temples, roars past my ears, and exits at my neck. The pavement slides under me, and I'm stunned, always, to see it so close. My brain tells me it is rough and hard, but in my eyes, it shimmers and glides. The weeds on the side of the road beckon me to reach out and brush my hand over their fluffy tops. I resist.

JANA RICHMAN's essays and articles have appeared in numerous magazines and journals. She is writing a book about motorcycling the Mormon Trail, to be published by Crown in 2005. She lives in Tucson, Arizona.