EDUCATION

by Virginia A.K. Moran

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A WHITE WOMAN'S JOURNEY IN A BLACK UNIVERSITY.

I'm about as white as they come. I don't mean only skin color—though that shows almost no trace of melanin. I'm talking inherited whiteness. And I'm talking acquired whiteness. And, finally, I'm talking about how life hates such neat divisions as black and white—how she loves to confound them.

My family is "FFV," which, for those not from the Upper South, means First Families of Virginia. I'm variously related to Shackelfords, Minors, and Fontaines—caught in the same web of Virginia gentry interbreeding as Thomas Jefferson. We mostly all trace back to Robert "King" Carter, who, at one time, owned much of the state. One of Carter's famous descendants is Robert E. Lee, to whom my father always fondly referred as "Cousin Robert." On a smaller scale than King Carter, my paternal great-grandfather had a six-hundred-acre plantation in Hanover County until he drank it away after the Civil War.

On my mother's side of the family, I trace my progenitors to Alabama, where my grandmother spurned the proposal of one of the Dukes of Duke University fame, only to fly into a rage when the black maid delivered breakfast along with the morning paper that announced Duke's engagement to someone else. My grandmother threw the breakfast tray across the room.

I don't need to point out how white this makes me—descended on both sides from landowners and blood-tied to the brilliant military strategist who gave his all to preserving the South's privileged way of life.

There is often a contradiction at the heart of being Southern, and my father embodied it. Though he was raised in a home that was politically conservative, he became a dedicated and active liberal in college. Partly this happened because his family valued individuality in thought, deed, and vote with a passion similar to that which animated the Confederate heart in the Civil War.

So when my father embraced pacifism in defiance of his father's position as head of the Charlottesville Draft Board and later on became active in Civil Rights—despite threats to his home, job, and family—it was paradoxically a measure of his marrow-deep Southernness. As a six-year-old, I accompanied him on sit-ins at segregated restaurants and on marches, and I picked up the phone when white separatists called our house to tell my father he was an n-word lover and didn't let it stand in their way that a small girl had answered.

That was the inherited part.

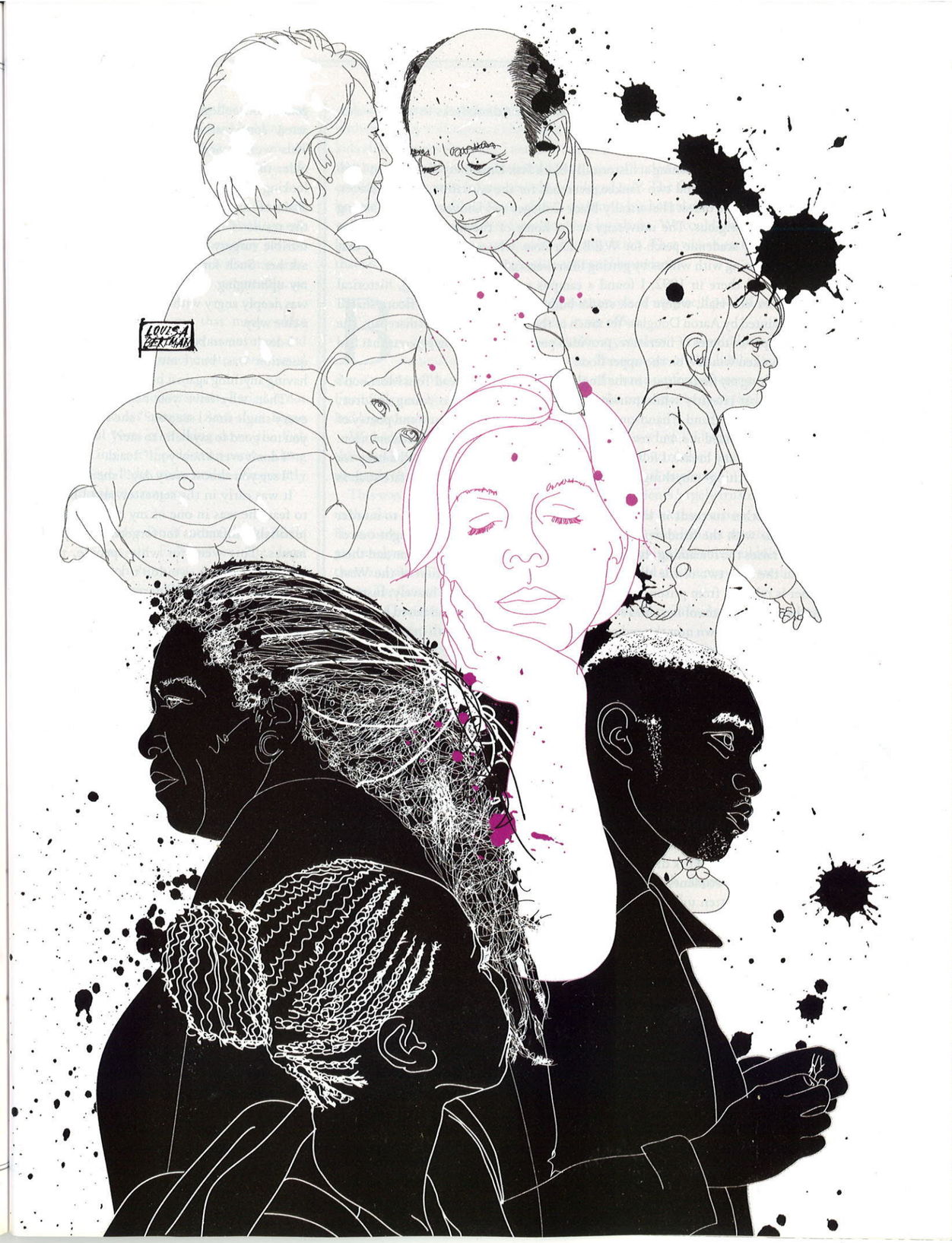
And here is the acquired part:

I was named for my great-aunt Virginia, who died a spinster in her nineties. She could make inhumanly small stitches in her silk chemises, and she also had a distinguished working career. Yet when my aunt asked her just before she died if there was anything she regretted doing, Virginia said, no, but there were quite a few things she regretted *not* doing.

I set out to follow my namesake down the same regrettable path. From earliest girlhood, I was happiest with a book, even playing school at home when class was over. I wasn't one of the fun girls who had her name on the chalkboard at the end of the day—not the HANNAH whose name was chalked next to SAM and CHRISTOPHER and all the other boys who were unable to stay in their seat, who lived for recess.

No—on the contrary—I was bookish, docile, and obedient for much of my life with very few exceptions. I got a Ph.D. and ended up working at institutions of higher learning. I even wrote a whimsical preface to my dissertation in which I play with the Derridean deconstructionist concept of whiteness. It's titled "A White Girl's Apology"—meaning explanation, not regret—but now when I reread it, even I don't know what I was talking about.

The dissertation itself is a novel called *The Algebra of Snow*. The central, relentless metaphor is of blindingly white, deathly snow. What's more, there is only one



Art by Louisa Bertman.

character—a woman mathematics professor on sabbatical in the Adirondacks in winter—and, honest, nothing happens in the novel.

Naturally, I ended up teaching at historically black Fisk University. Founded in 1866 by a Yankee general and two Yankee reverends for the education of freed slaves, Fisk is one of the oldest Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and among the most prestigious. The university is the home of the world-famous Jubilee Singers and was an early academic perch for W.E.B. Du Bois, who argued passionately that blacks move to equal footing with whites by getting liberal-arts educations.

By the time I arrived there in 1992, I found a campus comprised of soaring, historical buildings, such as Cravath Hall, where book stacks built with beautiful glass floors shared space with murals painted by Aaron Douglas. Yet much of the campus was also in disrepair. The old library, while empty of tomes of literature, provided perches for roosting pigeons that had flown in through a broken window on the upper floor.

When I began teaching my first courses in the English department, I'd read Toni Morrison's *Beloved* four times, most recently while nursing my firstborn. (I had two young children, whom I cared for with my husband, a handsome, unreliable man.) The structure and poetry of the book had always impressed me, but reading it this time overwhelmed me with emotion. With my child literally at my breast, I felt the powerful love it would take to kill a baby for whom you would do anything—anything, even take his life—to save him from a fate such as slavery.

In the book, the mother succeeds in killing only one child, though she means to murder and thus free all four with the handsaw. Her mother-in-law, who had been bought out of slavery by her son, raises the remaining children when their mother is sent to prison and their father is killed. In the end, two of the three children are lost to the seduction of the West. After the mother is released from prison, the grandmother—who had lived bravely, inspired others, survived even the trauma of her child's and her grandchild's deaths, and raised her other grandchildren—finally lies down near the end of her life, too tired to have faith in anything but color itself.

"Bring a little lavender in, if you got any," she asks her daughter-in-law from her dying bed. "Pink if you don't." And the daughter-in-law brings her a scrap of pink quilt, or, with no other alternative, sticks out her tongue.

There was always a moment at the beginning of each semester at Fisk when I'd look up from my lecture notes or roll book and think, "I am the only white person in this room." It was usually a fleeting thought, lost quickly in the semester's immersion in the business of teaching—lectures, papers, exams, office hours, despair, struggle, and, in almost every case, ultimate victory: acceptable grades all around.

I was a tough teacher, known for refusing to hand out unearned grades and, in fact, frequently giving F's when the work didn't meet basic expectations. About halfway through one fall semester—when my students had had firsthand experience with this grading method, but not all of them had gotten up to top speed—I'd just given back a quiz and dismissed the class when I heard a student outside the door sing out, "I got a D!" She was genuinely delighted.

In that environment, not even the bitterest student could claim the grading was racist—the few scattered A's also went to black students. It wasn't that no one noticed our racial differences. In fact, the racial divide was often a genuine part of classroom conversations. Inevitably, a day came in women's studies classes when we got into a good discussion of hair—the similar obsessions of black and white women with their coiffures and the differences between what we each meant by a "permanent," one straightening, one curling.

But there were some unnerving experiences with students, too. One day, a woman banged through my heavy office door and asked, "What have you got against me?"

Many of the young women at Fisk were middle-class, churchgoing, second- or third-generation college girls. They dressed and acted conservatively, for the most part. This woman was physically impressive—older than most other students and edgier-looking. Across her exposed chest lay a chain of complex scars that may have been the result of an accident or burns or some terrible surgery. But I sure wasn't going to ask her. Such forwardness was nowhere in my upbringing or nature. Plus, the woman was deeply angry with me, and I didn't have a clue why.

I don't remember what my answer to her question was, but I must have disclaimed having anything against her.

"Then why have you been rude to me every single time I see you?" she asked. "Are you too good to say hello to me?"

"I don't even know you!" I said.

"I see you almost every day!" she said.

It was early in the semester, and I began to fear she was in one of my classes. I was justifiably infamous for forgetting people's names. This went for white people, too, but my students wouldn't know this. I generally remembered faces, though, and was pretty sure I'd remember hers if I saw her in my classroom. Still, there was a possibility I'd gone unconscious sometime that semester.

"You aren't one of my students, are you?"

"No," she said. I was momentarily relieved. By then she was sitting in the chair across from me, throwing scowls of hostility in my direction.

"So how did I offend you?" I finally asked.

"I greet you every time I see you, and you have never once greeted me back. Now, where I come from, that's plain rude."

"That can't be true! I've never even seen you!"

"That's a lie! You just don't look at me."

"But how could I speak to you if I don't see you?"

"I said you don't look."

She was looking at me with an intensity that made it suddenly clear to me what she meant by look. It penetrated.

"You mean you actually said something to me and I ignored you?" I said in a small voice.

She settled back in her chair. "I didn't say you didn't *speak* to me. I said you didn't *greet* me."

She was holding on to my eyes, now that she had them. She nodded, still holding my gaze, a pro forma smile of greeting on her face, which about half of my face took a stab at mirroring.

I learned from that woman—whose name I still don't remember—that black people often look at one another when they pass on the street and nod, with or without words. Not doing this, especially repeatedly, is considered rude.

She learned from me that many white people would consider it far too intimate and intrusive to have someone enter their visual space that way.

But after that conversation, I tried it out on walks across campus. And thus began my several years of walking down the Fisk sidewalk in a sort of pedestrian party—a long series of eye-locks, nods, smiles—frequently with complete strangers.

I learned a lot of other things while I was at Fisk—where the local voudon store was (a section of the neighborhood Walgreen's); that black people could be deeply homophobic—which surprised me as much as discovering my gay landlords in Houston were Republicans. I was equally surprised to find out that people who had historically suffered so much physical abuse also routinely spanked their children, a practice anathema to my liberal way of thinking. And that, though they might spank their kids once they got here, many were also deeply opposed to aborting them.

On the lighter side, I learned what you should never leave on the floor. During one of the first classes of the semester, a freshman visibly fretted her way through class, then came up at the end, picked my pocketbook off the ground, and handed it to me.

I was more than a little startled—pocketbooks, in most women's lives, I think I can say with confidence, are a part of one's personal space.

The student said, "Oh, Dr. Moran, don't you know? You can never leave your pocketbook on the floor."

I must have looked blank, holding my bag, because she took mercy and explained: "It lowers your money."

And there were weightier shifts in my consciousness. I indulged in a brief, red-hot flirtation with one of my colleagues, a black South African. It's hard to have an affair when you have small kids all day, every day. Plus, I was still married, which meant something to me, and I was aware that my black female students would have been offended at my claiming a well-educated, well-employed black man for my already privileged self. The final kibosh on the affair was when he told me we would never be able to return to his homeland—which he longed to do—as I would be killed, he said, not by whites but by blacks. We could live interracially in Namibia, he explained, but not in post-apartheid South Africa. That was an early wake-up call to the fact that racism knows neither geographic nor racial boundaries.

But one of the most enduring disruptions of my placid pool of whiteness was another confrontation with a student in my office.

This woman was unmistakably my student—it would have been hard under any circumstances not to notice her. She was one of the Jubilee Singers—the present-day iteration of the group of Fisk students who once performed around the world to save the financially troubled school. This woman had the capacious body of the born opera singer—tall and big around.

We had reached the point in the Brit Lit semester when I'd handed back the rough drafts of their final critical paper. Though they didn't count toward their final grade, the papers carried the grade they would have received had they been final versions.

This was always a tough moment. By then, the students largely trusted me and were invested in the class. But most of them would get a failing grade on this version. Although I had warned them many times that most people would fail because they had not asserted, and then proven, a genuinely arguable thesis, students persisted in believing that this couldn't possibly happen to them and would blithely turn in a paper arguing, as did this woman's, something like "Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*."

Since Chaucer almost certainly wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, I gave the paper a failing grade. Shock ensued.

I'd learned to ride the wave of indignation, helping students rewrite (or, more accurately, write for the first time) truly critical essays. Everyone, generally, survived.

But we hadn't reached that happy point, and this woman was large and indignant. What's more, she'd missed class the week before because she'd been in jail. I never knew for what.

She was sprung in time to show up in my office one day, banging that heavy door behind her. She slapped her paper down on my desk and towered.

I was not just a little apprehensive, my puny white self frozen at the keyboard. I must have just looked at her, in my now-familiar blank mode.

Her Jubilee Singers voice boomed out.

"Dr. Moran, what this paper need is some Jesus!"

I'm pretty sure I just kept on sitting there. I had very little spiritual life then and no grip on the academic uses of Jesus whatsoever.

The student sat down hard in the chair next to my desk, slapped her hand on the Jesus-free paper pityingly, and added, "That, and a critical argument."

I hope I laughed with her then, as I have often laughed at the memory.

This student ended up doing very well in Brit Lit. For her oral presentation, she organized other students into a mock *Oprah Show* on Chaucer, with guests such as the director of the Kenya Center of Modern Chaucerian Studies. She made a terrific Oprah. She later took several creative-writing classes with me, and her voice on paper had the same power as her singing one.

I was numb a lot of the time in those years. Among other life-changing events, my mother died during my second semester at Fisk. While I was at home for Christmas that year, it was clear she was going soon. My father told me he planned to commit suicide when she died. He said it with such rational finality I didn't question how the courage of his

defiant youth had been extinguished by age and love.

After he told me that, I went upstairs to my husband and my tiny, sleeping children. I told my husband that I thought nothing much mattered at all, except possibly good hair color.

And then, a couple of years later, he left me.

I was carried along by my Fisk students through all of this. When my mother died, I got a card from each student in every class. The classroom was a warm and satisfying refuge when my husband left. And one student or another was on hand at my house many weeknights to help me get my kids through dinner and bedtime.

I stayed married to my husband for four years after he left, but eventually I divorced him. I left Fisk then to return to my ancestral home, an elderly father who had survived a suicide attempt, and a predominantly white university.

I thought I was going home to the light and space my family would provide, but it proved to be an altogether darker time. I saw my father out of this world and endured my children's struggles through middle school as their father came and went in our lives, refusing either to join us or to set us free.

The loss of husband and parents took a heavy toll on my sense of hope. I didn't know I was going to dive to such depths, or that I would myself need so much Jesus.

Nor did I know that back in Virginia I would find color—a coral reef of small pleasures in my funny sons, my reconnection with brother and cousin, the beauty of light and air in the summery cottage I bought after my father died. All this I would find in my family, those same people, descended like me, from Robert E. Lee and King Carter and the other children of the Upper South.

"Bring me some lavender," I might have said, "if you got any."