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"Joy is an act of resistance."

—Toi Derricotte

I should provide a disclaimer regarding poet, Cave Canem cofounder, and former Academy of American Poets chancellor Toi Derricotte, who spoke with me by phone from her home in Pittsburgh. She is truly one of my favorite people in the world. Like most, I knew her work before I knew her. I knew that she was an important voice in the literary canon after reading her poetic memoir, *The Black Notebooks*, which was a key instrument in helping me deconstruct my own feelings about race. This powerful book allowed me to peer through a window onto the life of another black woman—one who deals with race with equal struggle but in a different ecosystem of skin and experience, since Toi is a black woman who can pass for white. Along with her words, I also knew that Toi was one of the cofounding architects of Cave Canem, a vastly important literary passageway for black poets. All of this is pretty much etched in the literary record books. But my endearment for her reaches beyond her talents and contributions to a level where I have witnessed her love and honesty with life. No matter what the cards dealt to her, Toi radiates a humble and savory joy that is contagious, which is why she is one of my favorite people. Her joy.

JONES

Why writing? Why poetry? I know about your love for visual

art and your definite love for music. I know how, if Billie Holiday were still alive, you both would for sure be the best of friends. I am intrigued about why you chose writing over all the other art forms you love so much.

DERRICOTTE:

I think in some ways as I get older…I do think that maybe it chooses you. I can remember very early—like being one and a half years old—and my aunt who worked in a print shop would bring me colored paper and pencils home from work every day. From an early age, two years old, I was drawing and I had the feeling that whatever I drew was real. A house, a car. I thought the things on paper were as real as the furniture around me. My aunt and I lived in the same house for my first seven years, and she was a very encouraging person for me, one of the most important in my life. The paper and pencils were such a special gift, but I think I understood that I was getting more from her than colored pencils and paper. Something in me wanted to put something on paper. It gave me great pleasure.

I was an only child and had to play most of the time on my own. My mother liked a very clean house. She was in charge of a house where six people lived, and she liked everything to be perfect! She had learned how to manage a house from her mother, who was a domestic for a very wealthy family where she grew up in Louisiana. Since my mother spent a lot of time doing her work, I spent a lot of time alone. I would lie in bed with blankets over my knees and pretend my knees were mountains. My fingers and dolls would be people, animals, and cars driving up the mountains and living in the caves where the blankets made little pockets. I just saw the documentary about Fred Rogers, and he said that he had done the same thing as a child. I never talked about this before. I played alone most of the day. I think that has something to do with my ability to be alone now. I love being alone, and that's a good thing, because writers have to spend a lot of time alone. I get a lot of pleasure from being alone.

Jones:

Do you do that now? Do you play some of those imagination games now?

Derricotte:

[Long pause.] Wow, that's interesting. I don't know. I don't think I'm as playful as I could be. [Laughs.] Maybe I sort of transferred my imagination to my writing. And in fact the time when I write does feel like the times when I used to play with my imaginary friends or when I'd pretend to be a nun like the nuns who taught at the Catholic school I went to. I'd put towels or curtains on my head and I'd wear my mother's nightgown. In a way, writing does feel like that time because, when I write, I am kind of making up a dramatic story, the way I enacted stories that I made up when I was a child.

The world I lived in was so out of control, but when I played, I was in a world that I was totally in control of. And yet, when you write, you are also in communication with something like a mystery guest. You don't know what's coming, and yet it comes. So that "mystery person" becomes a very important part of the process.

Jones:

You seem to have reached a point in your career where you've made peace or closed chapters on very pivotal subjects and themes that have channeled so much of your work through the years—the relationship with your father, for example, the violence you endured as a child. Can you talk about what that means for you going forward? How has it changed you and how and what you write now? Are there ever moments, late at night or in the early morning haze, when you think you are not finished with some of that yet?

Derricotte:

The worst violence is the violence you carry inside yourself and do to yourself. I thought I was not good enough and that my father was beating me for a good reason. I thought that if I was like my father, he would stop beating me. I wanted to be like my father, but, at the same time, there was always a part of me that, at the end, resisted—a part of me that refused to give in, which, in a way, would have been a kind of emotional death. Writing is one of the ways I didn't die. After she read my poem "Dead Baby Speaks," Ruth Stone said to me, "They almost killed you."

I hadn't really thought of it that way. I kept doing things that sort of broke me out of the mold that my parents wanted. Not consciously. It wasn't as if I was choosing to do these things. I got pregnant my senior year in high school. I had been president of my class in Catholic high school, and I was going to be a nun, and then I got fucking pregnant! There was always some part of me that broke the mold. One part wanted to get it perfect, and the other part wouldn't cooperate. It was terrible when I couldn't be what I thought would make me lovable. But in the long run it brought me to a place where I began to express the parts of myself I hadn't known about before, the anger, hurt, and vulnerability. So, I was not like my father who seemed so strong, or like my mother who wanted to be this perfect black woman who had a perfect marriage, perfect husband and daughter, and had it all together. I did not fit into either of those molds. When I got to New York, I started to study poetry and share my poems for the first time. I had always had the desire to be a poet. I was writing poems when I was nine or ten years old, but I never showed anyone because, in a way, it was the only thing I really owned, and if anyone crushed that part of my ego, I didn't think I would live.

When I came home from the hospital with my newborn son, the first place I took him was to see my father. I kept

thinking there was something I could do to have a connection with him. While I was there, I went to look in my footlocker in my old bedroom. I had left everything when I went to have Tony in a home for unwed mothers. When I checked my footlocker, all of my poems and papers were gone. I asked my father, "What did you do with my things?" He said he had burned everything in the backyard in an oil drum. That had been the private and sacred part of myself that I hoped someone would protect. And yet the poet lived. Even the worst thing I could think of could not destroy the poet. Because the poet isn't in the poems, not in what I write down; the poet is inside.

Sometimes, I do think that I am not finished with these subjects. In my new and selected poems, some new poems speak about the violence in my childhood. But they do it in a different way. They don't seem to need to reenact the violence in language the way they used to, to pit the poem against the memory, like a battle, and establish a new order in which art (not brutality) reigns. The poems seem to think with a different kind of mind now, one that doesn't have to fight to be.

For me poems are always questions. And the new questions ask how do we treat ourselves and each other with kindness and respect, with humor and intelligence, knowing that we are creatures driven by needs that can harm others, and yet deserving of love. I still want to write without fear because it's important to show that we're all human. How do I support that choice in my life? Things are always changing; we always struggle with good and evil and make choices about how we want to live in a world that is not perfect.

Jones:

Cave Canem was established in 1996. As the organization's cofounder with Cornelius Eady, you've opened up a world to so many writers. I think about all that you've done for the hundreds of black poets who've come through the Cave Canem retreat. I think about your recruitment, year after year, of amazing faculty who've helped poets cultivate their best

work. I think about how your leadership of Cave Canem has essentially taken off the blinders of the literary world when it comes to black literature and all its incredible aesthetics, subject matters, and literary excellence. My question is this: what has Cave Canem given you on a personal level?

Derricotte:

Friends. These are my guys. These are my soul guys. This is my family. These are the people I will sit with at the kitchen table in heaven. It's love. It's soul magic. It's heaven before you get to heaven. The Cave Canem retreat happens every year in June. This past year, in the opening circle, I talked about my own sense of unworthiness when I'm sitting in that circle. Certainly, I felt unworthy to be a so-called "leader" because I have very mixed feelings about what it is to be a leader in the first place. I think: "Am I good enough? Am I deserving?" In the past, I didn't want to say that because I thought a leader is supposed to inspire confidence and look perfectly together. And I didn't want to let people down. But Cornelius, Sarah [Micklem], and I did what we did together. It worked because there wasn't a "leader." We trusted ourselves and each other. We used each other's strengths, we were loyal, and we worked hard. It's all right to be a person with self-doubts in Cave Canem. There is no perfect way. We just have to bring what we have.

I'm very glad when people get awards. I think it's wonderful. But Cave Canem was never about getting awards. It's about a conversation happening among us that didn't have a place to happen before. That's where the riches come from—that conversation. There is something about continuing to be a black poet in today's world that, I believe, creates a very special, even brilliant kind of mind. I've always thought that, but being with the Cave Canem poets for over twenty years at the weeklong retreat, I've become convinced. It's a place where people feel to me—in the best way—open, loving, and real. There are all kinds of people there, people of all ages, degrees of success, attainment as poets. People who have never

studied before, people with PhDs, and people who began writing in prison. Being black poets unites us all.

Jones:

You were born and raised in Detroit. Can you talk about how the city has influenced your work? Isn't it true that you happened to move to New York City just a day or two—literally—before the eruption of the Detroit Riots in 1967?

Derricotte:

It's interesting. I was just talking yesterday with a young black woman working for the Kresge Foundation there, and I was saying how much Detroit has changed for poets since I was growing up. So many of the most important poets of today—so many Cave Canem poets—came from Detroit. Vievee Francis began a renaissance.

When I was growing up, if you were going to be a successful black person, you either had to be a doctor or marry a doctor. I had no idea you could be a poet! Getting out of my house was a good thing, even necessary, for survival. I was looking for a safe home, and I was drawn into all kinds of groups of people and neighborhoods. I spent the night with the Catholic girls in the suburbs. I practically lived with my best friend, whose family was from New Orleans. I was like another daughter in that house. When I was in high school, there was the first generation of mixed white and black social groups—beatniks and artists—that I hung out with. At the same time, I was going to be a nun!

When I had my son, we lived in the Jeffries Projects on the fourteenth floor of a high rise. We went to New York the weekend of the riots to begin to get settled, and when we came back, and I looked out of the window, there was a whole new vista. The neighborhood had been burned out. It was a like a war had happened while I was away. So, in a way, the Detroit that exists today is not *my* Detroit. It's like the city got divided in two by the riots, and if you didn't go through that

change and what came after, you can't lay claim. It's as if the riots put a river or mountain between me and Detroit that is uncrossable. I think all along I was really looking for a safe home for myself as a poet, and I began to know what that felt like when we moved to New York. Something that I have in common with you, Parneshia, is that I enjoy people so much. When I go into various environments, people don't have to be this way or that way. I just let myself enjoy what's there. They told me that when I was eighteen months old I would pull myself up on a chair to the window in the kitchen and wave at people, frantically—anyone who passed by. "Hi there! Hi!"

It's almost like a curtain opens up when I meet another person. Suddenly, they are on stage, and I'm like, "Wow! This is a big deal!" I feel so fortunate that there are other people on this planet. I don't want to be around them all the time [laughs], but those moments of sharing are very good.

Jones:

Well, Detroit is that kind of place. It represents music. The heartbeat of the auto industry. It represents so many classes of humans all within a small context of the wider country. I feel like Detroit has been backdrop for you in some way.

Derricotte:

I felt like I was always searching. We lived in a middle-class black neighborhood and, as soon as I could walk, I would walk across Ryan Road where the white people lived. And it's true that being a woman who is light skinned (who could pass for white) allowed me access to places where other black folks could not have gone. I wasn't pretending to be something I wasn't. I was just allowed to go places that were off limits to others. I was invisible.

I sensed the tension, though. I remember going to Saks Fifth Avenue with my grandmother and the fact that blacks weren't even allowed to be elevator operators. I always knew I was in a slightly dangerous situation. When I'd go to the

neighborhood where the white factory workers lived, I saw that there were poor white people who lived harder lives than my family. I realized that everybody has problems and poverties. But being black had a richness about it that I don't believe many of the white people I knew had in their lives. I knew that I didn't want to trade my life for any of the white girls' lives that I visited, even the well-to-do ones. It's about the gifts that we take for granted—the music, food, the celebration of life, the way we understand each other and are connected because of our history. There was so much that I didn't even think of as special. But I lived an exceptional life. Growing up at the beginnings of Motown. Aretha Franklin lived down the street from me! I had access to amazing cultural riches because this was a time when black people began to have a degree of economic power and the ability to sort of move around more. There was a feeling that we were getting somewhere, and there were all kinds of communities whose resources we could draw on—the black church, the middle-class communities like the women's social groups.

Jones:

The Detroit Riots seem to mirror a lot of the race wars we are having now in this country. How do you take a breath in our current state of affairs? How do you live and write in this climate?

Derricotte:

I think writers don't know what they're doing. I mean, I think we have something in mind and we go after it, but if you hold it too tight, you can't create something new. For me, being creative means that something is operating beyond my control. And a part of you trusts it more than you do yourself. And that is what makes it come together—openness to what's going to come that you don't know about.

I admire those poets who are growing and changing what they're writing about and how they are writing. It's brave,

always, to change, not just in writing. This morning I was listening to the gospel singers The Alabama Blind Boys, and they are still recording, still inventing their way. They started in the '40s in the Deep South. One grew up in an orphanage for blind black children. Can you imagine what that was like in the early part of the century?

I think African American poets are doing in language what black people have always done in music or dance. You know you're up against something, something so limiting that it can annihilate you. It's life or death. I believe our power comes from that refusal to die. A white person asked me the other day why I hadn't just passed for white when I was young. It was crazy. I told her that I would never give up this history, this mind and heart that came from it, this community, this power. I also told her how proud I was that it's black people who have made American culture. [Laughs.]

Jones:

God, that is so brilliant!

In some of your current work, you talk about what it means to age, what happens to the body and spirit over the years. This is such important work, especially from the perspective of a woman poet. Is it easier as you get older to write about age, sex, and the body as you see it?

Derricotte:

I remember Richard Wilbur, whose poetry I greatly admire… I remember him saying he hadn't written a poem in seven years. And I thought to myself, I would never admit that. That would be a devastating thing to admit if I hadn't written a poem in seven years. I wouldn't want people to know it. I would be ashamed. But I admired that he said it because, even though I could never do that, I think part of our job as poets is to report back.

Things change. The kind of poetry people read twenty years ago may not be in vogue today. You have the same fears

as a writer. Are you relevant? Are you saying things people can relate to? Someone once said about my work—I think it was Marilyn Hacker—that I am harder on myself than my subject. That isn't true anymore. I'm not as hard on myself as a writer as I used to be. In certain ways, especially about form, I feel more natural, more "in my body," as if I'm starting out with a kind of poetic heartbeat and breath, an internal form that the language fits inside of. For so long I had to dig up everything—form, too. Form and content are never separate things. *The Black Notebooks* was written in iambic pentameter at one time. It's a different part of my life now. I am still reporting back what it's like—hopefully—for as long as I can.

Jones:

You report back. I love that! What do we have to look forward to in the new work that you're cultivating? Will you ever consider a continuation of *The Black Notebooks?* I think that it is one of the most arresting works of literature dealing with race.

Derricotte:

Well, I have put together a new and selected now. It gives me an opportunity to look at the various identities I've addressed in my writing. I didn't realize it until I put the *Selected* together, but in each of my books, I took on a different identity—in *natural birth* being a mother, in *The Undertaker's Daughter*, being a daughter, in *The Black Notebooks*, of course, looking at race and class. The personal "I" in a way was a formal choice because having to tell the truth, if you stick to it, is kind of like a wall, a rule, the way a poet knocks against the walls of a sonnet or a pantoum.

The new work seems to me to be a kind of, well, "reward" for all that examination. There's a poem called "What Are You?" which is a culmination of *The Black Notebooks* for me because it answers that question I worked on for so many

years. The last part of the poem says what makes me black is that strip of DNA that goes through Ghana and out Cape Coast—that strip that belongs to all of the people who have gone through slavery, on both sides of it, in Africa and in the diaspora, those who were taken away and those who stayed.

I think I am writing about what it means to age, to become old, and to die. I write about my spiritual life, which is really changing now. I want to take a cue from some of the Cave Canem poets who are writing about what's happening in today's world. I want to address some of that.

Jones:

Will you write about your great grandson?

Derricotte:

I haven't written about my current family. You know a lot of poets stay away from their current family. I do have some love poems for my son. It's not that I haven't written about my great grandson, though sometimes they're not your best poems.

I am one of the most fortunate people I have ever known because of Cave Canem. I mean, continuing the values that I have loved most in my life and seeing those values in the lives of other people, how the Cave Canem poets are operating in love and making great art with compassion. Everywhere a Cave Canem poet is is another beginning, another nexus for change. I wanted to break open the silences in my childhood that I sensed were doing more harm than good. Boy, to see that happen is beyond miraculous. And don't forget, I get Cornelius and Sarah in my life, and the Cave Canem poets. What a family! What a loving family!