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Guinea Woman, and: Nanny

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Callaloo, Volume 41, Number 1, Winter 2018, pp. 48-51 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2018.0009>



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GUINEA WOMAN*

by Lorna Goodison

Great grandmother
was a guinea woman
wide eyes turning
the corners of her face
could see behind her
her cheeks dusted with
a fine rash of jet-bead warts
that itched when the rain set up.

Great grandmother's waistline
the span of a headman's hand
slender and tall like a cane stalk
with a guinea woman's antelope-quick walk
and when she paused
her gaze would look to sea
her profile fine like some obverse impression
on a guinea coin from royal memory.

It seems her fate was anchored
in the unfathomable sea
for great grandmother caught the eye of a sailor
whose ship sailed without him from Lucea harbour.
Great grandmother's royal scent of
cinnamon and escallions
drew the sailor up the straits of Africa,
the evidence my blue-eyed grandmother
the first Mulatta
taken into backra's household
and covered with his name.
They forbade great grandmother's
guinea woman presence

* "Guinea Woman" was originally published in *I Am Becoming My Mother* (Beacon Books, 1995). Reprinted with permission from the author.

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they washed away her scent of
cinnamon and escallions
controlled the child's antelope walk
and called her uprisings rebellions.

But, great grandmother
I see your features blood dark
appearing
in the children of each new
breeding
the high yellow brown
is darkening down.
Listen, children
it's great grandmother's turn.

NANNY*

by Lorna Goodison

My womb was sealed
with molten wax
of killer bees
for nothing should enter
nothing should leave
the state of perpetual siege
the condition of the warrior.

From then my whole body would quicken
at the birth of everyone of my people's children.
I was schooled in the green-giving ways
of the roots and vines
made accomplice to the healing acts
of Chainey root, fever grass & vervain.

My breasts flattened
settled unmoving against my chest
my movements ran equal
to the rhythms of the forest.

I could sense and sift
the footfall of men
from the animals
and smell danger
death's odour
in the wind's shift.

When my eyes rendered
light from the dark
my battle song opened
into a solitaire's moan
I became most knowing
and forever alone.

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And when my training was over
they circled my waist with pumpkin seeds
and dried okra, a traveller's jigida
and sold me to the traders
all my weapons within me.
I was sent, tell that to history.

When your sorrow obscures the skies
other women like me will rise.