

Getting Our Stuff Back

By Monica A. Coleman

"Somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff."

In her critically acclaimed choreopoem for colored girls who've considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf, Ntozake Shange's Black female character known only as "lady in green" laments, complains and demands: "somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff." You know, her *stuff*: those eclectic things that make her who she is. She describes them this way:

i want my things/
i want my arm with the hot iron
scar & my leg wit the flea bite/ i
want my calloused feet & quik
language back in my mouth/
fried plantains/ pineapple pear
juice/
sun-ra & joseph & jules

I smile when I read about her stuff because she sounds like a true sister-girl. She is filled with the ordinary things that constitute many Black women - battle scars, hard work, quick wit, good food, spirituality and sexuality. It rings familiar in my ears and I know what it feels like when someone walks off with your STUFF.

Since we have been in this country, someone has been trying to take our STUFF. The experience of slavery where our bodies were both property and battlefields left us open to many men who ran trains on us for economic profit. They stole and raped something that never

belonged to them. In exchange, Black women have been portrayed STUFF-less: either as cold hard creatures with no sexuality, only a propensity for mothering, or oversexualized hootchy-mamas who will give it up to anyone for a dime, or maybe even for free.

I'm talking about the media images of Black women's sexuality. The mammy figures I've seen in way too many movies and on bottles of Aunt Jemima pancake syrup and the scantily clad dancing Jezebels that keep MTV and BET in business. The media, with the help of some of our sisters, have walked off with our precious spiritual and sexual selves and prostituted it for their own gain.

Some of our stuff was stolen personally, like the lady in green:

& it waznt a spirit took my stuff/ waz a man
whose ego walked round like Rodan's
shadow/ waz a man faster in my inno-
cencel/ waz a lover/ i made too much room
for/

In our intimate relationships, we've been betrayed, abused, lied on, and talked about. Our friends, our family members and our lovers have been known to steal our spirits so silently and slowly until we don't even know our stuff is gone, until we turn around one day to get something and can't find it. Harsh words, brutal fists, gossiping lips and painful silences void of affirmation are the tools of these thieves. And there's no way to prosecute because the statute has expired by the time you realize your stuff is gone.

I try to remember when my stuff was stolen. I

try to think about when I lost my positive self-image, the belief that I was beautiful, the confidence in my own body and movements. I strain to remember the first time someone treated me as though my opinion didn't matter, or my secrets were now community news. I struggle to pinpoint the day my access to my favorite foods and places of worship slipped through my fingers.

Was it, I ask, when my father said I was as pretty as the earrings he gave me for my twenty-second birthday – the first time I ever remember him calling me “pretty” – and I thought “too little, too late”? Was it the fact that my teenage shopping self could never find the right color foundation or hosiery? Was it when my high school boyfriend liked my best friend more than me because she was the preferred color of our quasi-militant generation? Was it when my girlfriend told me off in the hallway revealing all my secrets and throwing them up in my face for everyone to hear? Was it when my rapist began his night of torture by reading my journals?

Or maybe it's the little things: like the way most beauticians can't do my hair because it's “too thick.” Or how I compare myself to the white women in the gym when I know my body will never look like theirs. Or the religion I hid behind to avoid dealing with and touching my own body?

I only know that one day I went to love a man and did not love myself. I know that I turned around to share my stuff with my best friend and the bag was empty. I could only vaguely remember the last time I had it, and I knew I wanted it back.

I've found my stuff in the most diverse places. While I am intensely personal in my pain, I find my stuff in community. When I run to others to sustain me, I find my stuff in the corner of my own soul. I found my stuff when I was looking, and other times when I stumbled over it. In the trees of my favorite park where I go to hear God, I found my spirituality. In the words of “Sweet Honey in the Rock,” I found my heritage. In the long baths that force me to look at and touch my own body, I found that the bends and the curves, the muscles and the lumps all make me who I am. In the communities of people who eat like I eat, dress like I dress, sing like I sing and talk like I talk, I found that I hadn't completely lost what seemed to be stolen.

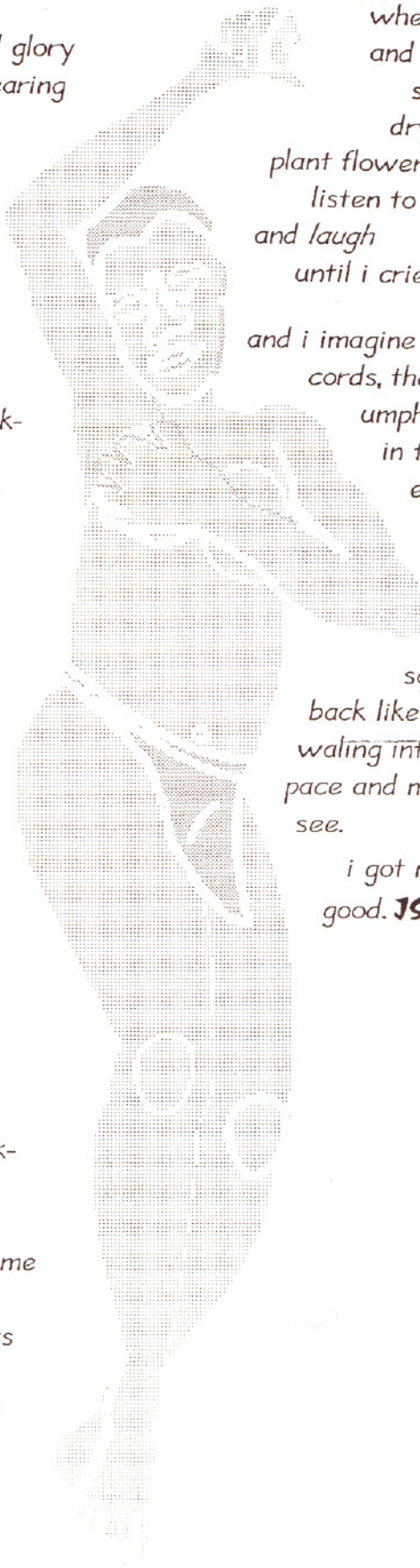
I find my self-esteem, my sexuality, my home-like places nearly everyday now. Mainly because I am looking for them and I affirm them when I see them. And largely because I stay away from the people, the media, and the images that deny me with their greedy eyes and empty robber bags. So it occurred to me one day as an ex-lover gave me that five-word compliment that is the hip-hop generation's equivalent of a love sonnet: “Girl, you know you fine.” And I thought and said, “Yeah.”

I ran into a close male friend at the Sweet Honey in the Rock concert in Atlanta a couple of months ago. We had both traveled 4 hours for a 2-hour experience that we knew would restore our souls. During the intermission, he embraced me and said, “I got my stuff back today!” Immediately we knew the reference to Ntozake Shange's character and I wrote this poem for him, myself and anyone else who's ever been betrayed or denied or unaffirmed:

i got my stuff back today
walking down abernathy avenue
seeing my people in all their spiritual glory
baking patties, frying plantain, wearing
mecca & enyce
standing in line at the krispy
crème
tying cloth around their heads be-
fore pouring water in the shrine of
black motherhood
twisting energy into the strands of
the hair of hebrew sisteren
minding their own business while mak-
ing it mine
giving me a better place to call home

i got my stuff back today
pressing the tape into the machine
as the sun rose over the mountains
hearing voices that were
Black, female and free
(I do remember that's why I believe)
tell me
that my memory would sustain my
belief
and suddenly everything
everything
became clear
and i worshipped

i got my stuff back today
in the circle of your arms
where your oil-scented skin and musk-
flavored curls
welcomed me the way i came
and surrendered your power to give me
honor
creating love where before there was
emptiness and pain.
reminding me of the salty-sweet
taste of passion



i got my stuff back today
when no one answered the phone
and i was forced to
sleep through the whole night
dry my own tears
plant flowers in the rain
listen to my inner voice
and laugh
until i cried again
and i imagine gathering the stories, the re-
cords, the emotions, the failures, the tri-
umphs and seeing them, this time, not
in the hands of a gloved-robber
exiting quietly through an open
window, but scattered around
the ground, and picking them
up - piece by piece - and
putting them in a drawstring
satchel and strapping it on my
back like a Peruvian woven backpack, and
waling into the east and it's my bag, my
pace and my hair over my shoulders that i
see.

i got my stuff back today. and it feels
good. JS