

Vietnam Generation

Volume 3

Number 1 *Swords into Ploughshares: A "Home Front"*
Anthology

Article 8

1-1990

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Recommended Citation

Bambara, Toni Cade (1990) "The Long Night," *Vietnam Generation*: Vol. 3 : No. 1 , Article 8.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration/vol3/iss1/8>

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THE LONG NIGHT

TONI CADE BAMBARA

It whistled past her, ricocheted off the metal hamper and slammed into the radiator pipe, banging the door ajar. Glass was crashing in the apartment below, taking a long time finishing, as though happening in a slow-motion filming. Spatters of concrete and brick nearby, splintering of wood. The pink of a bullet on the fire escape. Storms of grit heaved up against the livingroom windows. Herds over the roof, bellowing. And something else. Pots and pans maybe, or cymbals as though dropping from two thousand stories. Out back somewhere a car stalling, coughing, sputtering, then, like garbage cans being scraped against concrete, turning over.

“Don’t kill ‘em. Don’t kill—” A barrage of shots and a radio suddenly up then mute.

She sat huddled in the dark, balled up tight, deep within the bathtub. Her hands were bleeding where the nails cut, fists as clenched as teeth, as mercilessly drawing blood. Her eyes fixed on the fissure in the porcelain just below the faucet, a split leading down to the drain.

My lifeline. She opened her mouth to say it. The dark flooded in, but nothing came out. *I’ll never,* she thought, *I’ll never take another bath in this tub again. If I get through the night,* she added. *If I...*

Many wouldn’t. Many hadn’t. A student on the stoop still where death at eight o’clock had seeped into a hole in the back of his neck.

Heavy thuds on the stairs coming two, three, five steps at a time. Bells ringing. Bodies heaving against doors. She slammed her face shut and squashed herself into, under the faucet, down the drain.

“A mop and a pail, for chrissakes!”

A door slamming with difficulty, meeting resistance. Banging. Bolts. “Go away. Please, please go away. We got lil kids in here. Please.”

Heavy boots on the steps again. A menace on the landing. Grunt breathing at her door. A sudden body crash against the steel plating, wood, locks. She jammed her mouth down between her knees to keep from laughing or screaming, one. *A police lock to lock the police out.* Down the hall another weight against a door. Someone crying. Near the stair hushed growling.

“Shoot the lock off... gotta... mop... pail... so much blood.”

“Suppose someone’s home? We don’t want...”

“What’ll we charge em with?”

“Think of somethin... riot soon.”

“Maybe... hate to get caught up here... take your badge off.”

In the Schenley box marked This Side Up a cargo too precious to destroy, dangerous to transport, death to surrender up. If she dashed to the kitchen and skidded under the table, there might be time to. *To what? Why think of it now*, she thought, crushing herself closer to the drain and imagining instead her limbs scooting across the rooftops, broken field running over the skylights, past pipes like Carl had taught her, the leap to the black room they'd built. She'd wallpapered the closet herself, tap-tapping to be sure of a uniform sound. Wallpapered all the closets with the same quaint, floral pattern Carl's mother had sent all the way from Montreal.

"Open up. Police."

*Wanted: The Killers of Lester Long/The Killers of Bobby Hutton/
The Killers of James Rutledge/The Killers of Teddy—*

"Open up in there."

*Do Not Embrace Amnesia. The Struggle Continues. Memory is a
Powerful—*

"Shoot the fuckin' lock off, for chrissakes."

*The Assault on the Begone Pesticide Plant Was an Assault on
Guinea Pigism in Our Community. The People Spoke. The Attack on the
Precinct Was an Attack on Lawlessness. The People—*

A blast. Another. The door shoved brutally back against the carpet she'd never laid quite right.

Harriet Tubman's Work Must Continue. Support the—

And if I'm caught. She dared not think it. Caught in a bathtub. No place to flee but down. And they'd hound her into the pipes. The savage claw scratching against metal, clutching for flesh. *The box:* posters, photos, statistics... *all that work. Is the tablecloth long enough?* She pictured it somewhere behind her left eye where a throb had begun. *The box.* The addresses were under the camphor bar in the silverware drawer. Detective special, stolen from ballistics in the back coils of the refrigerator in a rat-poison box. In the sugar cannister the negatives of the campus agents. And in the safest place, tacked to the cork board in clear view, the number you called which for fifty dollars taped to a page of the main library encyclopedia yielded up a copy of your dossier. Fifty feet of useless footage sprang from her eye sockets; hurtling herself through the dark to the kitchen with a torch. Or running full tilt at the ransackers with a lance.

"Get a light."

"Shithead, we'll draw our own fire. Flashlight."

"Where's the kitchen in this place?"

They'd tracked in a smell. It filled the room. It sought her out and gagged her. They'd find the box. *Africa Supports Us. Asia Supports Us. Latin Amer—*

"No pail. Look for some bucket..."

They'll find the box. They'll look for me. The blows. The madness. The best of myself splattered bright against the porcelain. No. The best of myself inviolate. Maybe.

72 VIETNAM GENERATION

They'd ask about the others. Cracking her head against the faucet, they'd demand something ungivable, but settle perhaps for anything snatchable, any anything to sanctify the massacre in the streets below. And would she allow them to tear the best of herself from herself, blast her from her place, that place inviolate, make her heap ratfilth into that place, that place where no corruption touched, where she curled up and got cozy or spread her life leisurely out for inventory. Hurtle her into the yellow-green slime of her own doing, undoing, to crawl on wrecked limbs in that violated place, that place. Could she trust herself. Was she who she'd struggled to become so long. To become in an obscene instant the exact who she'd always despised, condemned to that place, fouled.

She would tell. They would beat her and she would tell more. They would taunt and torture and she would tell all. They'd put a gun to her eye and she would tell even what there wasn't to tell. Chant it. Sing it. Moan it. Shout it. Incriminate her neighbors. Sell her mama. Hawk her daddy. Trade her friends. Turn in everybody. Turn on everything. And never be the same. Dead or alive, never be the same. Blasted from her place.

My children will... but then I'll have no children, there'll be no room in that place to incubate children. They'd know. Growing there in the folds of that fouled place they'd know. And they'd ask. And their eyes would wipe me out.

"What's this?"

Rummaging in the refrigerator. Something sloshing to the floor. The ten-watt floodlight.

"Just get some papers to wipe our... look at my shoes."

Faucet running. Glasses slipping off the drain to crash against the pots.

"My God, my boots are full of blood..."

"... footprints..."

My ancestors. Those breaths around me in sudden inexplicable moments of yes; welcome intrusions from some other where saying yes, keep on.... They'll spit on me in the night.

"Let's get out of here."

Could she tell? Wouldn't her heart vault into the brain and stop it out? Trained. In case of betrayal, self-destruct.

The bathroom door flung wide and a gust blew over her neck and back. That smell. A glob of light tumbled round the dark and settled somewhere. She could not look. Maybe she was the light. Balled up so tight, so hot in panic, so near death and another death yet, glowin, glowin red/orange/yellow, glinting shots of shine around the arena in a suicidal beam. She would not look up. She would not look and meet those eyes. The eyes of the beast. Of the golden monkey that spits and kills.

"Here's a bucket."

The scrape of the bucket being dragged out from behind the toilet—scraping across her spine. The voice a boot on her neck. This was

it, and what did she have. Heat behind the refrigerator. Heat in the Kotex box in the back of the linen closet. And she in the bathtub. With that smell. That reek that stopped her heart and forced her eyelids up. And then she saw him. Up too close to the screen, surreal. Jello-like around the edges like Superman taking off. Superman leaping into the bathtub to break her back. No. She would never tell. Strike. She would strike. Someone or three would go down in the go-down.

She'd made out a will. They all had. Long lines of relatives and associates named executors of estate in case of funnytime death. Statutes of limitations had a way of running out when charges were brought against the police.

"Let's go."

The glob of light clicked off. The drip of the toilet splashing onto the tiles now. Door pulled in starts and stops shut. The heavy crashing thuds down the stairs. She listened. Tight up against the lifeline fissure of rust gone green, she swept the mind clean to hear the footfalls, to isolate them. Someone had stayed behind. Someone was waiting in the dark. Sly death crouched to pounce upon her life and wreck it. Crouched and waiting, impatient to tear her with savage teeth, her essence spilling out of place and oozing down the chin, the chest, the arm. Impatient he would creep across the carpet of leaves that covered the pit. And she would strike. She was poised for attack. And with what would she undo him? A can of Ajax? A wire soap dish? *My Afropick*, she decided, spotting it on the toilet tank. Seemed fitting. She almost wished someone were there. Silence. Stuck horns, screaming, scurrying of feet against the slush, but silence. Riffing of pages somewhere in the living room. Curtains fluttering in shreds. But silence.

Vibrations from the porcelain were drowsing her asleep. Not the same vibes as from other walls.

Drafts from school walls blew rudely in the young face awakening, as she stood in the corner under punishment from those early caretakers. Chill breeze quivering the nostril hairs where up against the wall the cast of twelve, assembled for some droll Punch and Judy show, awaited directions from those other caretakers. Or the accurately known vibrations from walls encountered deliberately blindfolded, when they learned to maneuver in the dark, to touchtalk pipes and rods out of their hiding places and assemble guns and radio sets by Braille. Trained to recognize obstacles by the length and chill of their breezes, so as not to bump and knock breath and blood out and leave a break in the chain, a hole in the network, a chink just large enough for a boot to kick through, a butt to muzzle in. the walls of the bathtub were different.

More like the vibes of the stone quarry of two summers before where she and Carl had worked for \$1.10 an hour for the privilege of talking with workers who worked for \$1.10 an hour for the privilege of eating. Or like the walls of the grotto where she'd spent the only vacation of her life, wet, love-warmed and dazzled for a whole summer with Carl.

74 VIETNAM GENERATION

Shouting foolishness in all the tongues of the sea, they swam underwater entangling four legs and surfacing, felt/heard their shouts glanceback off the grotto walls cool and hollow against their cheeks. That was last summer. The Carl of moss and fruit and bitten shoulders and the privacy of mosquito-net tents. The Carl before the call to Canada. The call into exile.

She stopped shivering at first light. That milk-of-magnesia-bottle blue, Carl had said. She looked at her hands, sticky and brown, pieces of nail like glass shards atop a brick wall. Pain shot straight through. Like in the days of intensive training when the hands would no longer open and shut by ordinary means. Hot water, Ben-Gay, the gun strapped in the hand with adhesive tape. The practice shots squeezed off, bringing tears down the nose on the inside, then pushed back again by the smoke. Chinese mustard, Carl had said.

It took all of ten minutes to wrap the hands around the edge of the tub and hoist herself up. That same tremor of hysterical laughter, stopped before, now erupted from her knees, it seemed. Straddling a bathtub, a bucking-bronco bathtub, she could not stop it now. Lava poured from her mouth and flopped her head over onto the hamper, denting it while the lower half of her body was still being dragged up out of the tub like some crazed water creature pushing for the next stage.

"Oh my," she guffawed, like Carl's mother used to when Carl broke through her ladylike decorum with some wild tale. *Oh my, she'd said when she'd opened her door to find Carl's woman there and Carl already gone. Oh my, when Concordia Bridge flashed on the screen, fixing them in the middle of the rug. The tan station wagon speeding past the police barriers, a mere blur between television cameras, barely visible through snow and distance as it seemingly flew onto the island where the Cuban officials waited with the plane. She had dropped her bag on the rug and run to the television, the older woman already there turning up the sound.*

They'd traded the lives of two Canadian trade commissioners for the release of the West Indian students charged with kidnapping a dean, extortion, and untold damage to the university's two-million-dollar computer complex. For their release and safe passage to Algeria for the students and what was left of the cell. And she had come too late. Aboard the plane she'd learned that Algeria had refused them. In the cab, she'd heard a West Indian diplomat disinherit the fugitives. She had arrived at Carl's mother's in time for the televised getaway and little more.

Buzzy, Hassan, and Lydia barely being picked up by the cameras as they got out of the station wagon. The other Bloods she didn't know, mere coattails heading into a building. Then Carl, barely recognizable through the swirling snow, waving his last goodbye, as his mother patted the TV box as though it were only a photograph she was seeing safely souvenired in a snowball paperweight.

She was out of the tub now, slipping unsteadily. She'd thought she'd stand upright. That was the idea. But she found herself lunging toward the pockmarked windows like a stumble drunk. One rectangle of bullet-splattered frame led to the pavement below, where she wanted to be. But not like this, in a faint, leaning onto the fire escape slats in a swoon. But she did want to be below.

For the people would be emerging from the dark of their places. Surfacing for the first time in eons into clarity. And their skins would shrink from—not remembering it like this—the climate. Feet wary of the pavement for heartless jokes they did remember. And their brains, true to their tropism, would stretch the whole body up to the light, generating new food out of the old staple wisdoms. And they would look at each other as if for the first time and wonder, who is this one and that one. And she would join the circle gathered round the ancient stains in the street. And someone would whisper, and who are you. And who are you. And who are we. And they would tell each other in a language that had evolved, not by magic, in the caves.



Photo courtesy of Ohio State University Archives.