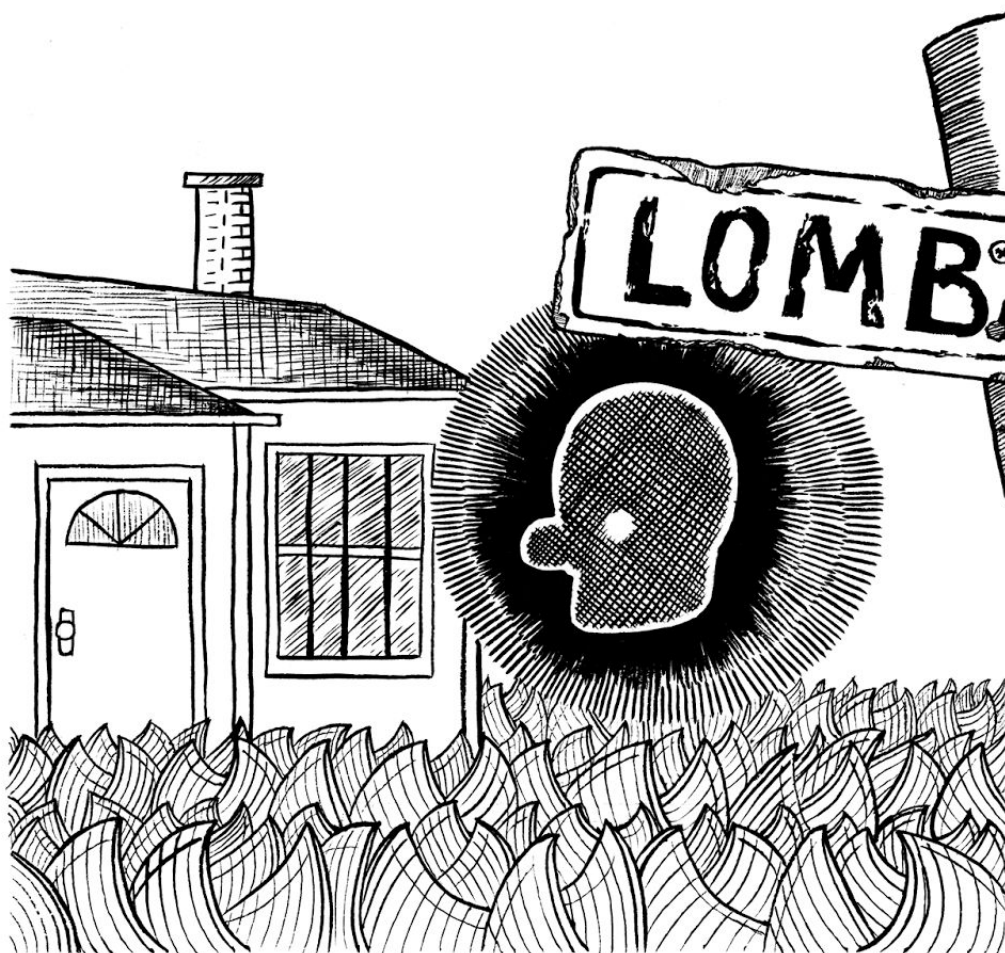


SCHOOL RUINS BROWN GIRLS  
A COLLECTION OF PROSE AND POETRY

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## Foreword

The following is a collection of prose-poems and thank you notes all centered around my secondary education. Beginning in high school, I began to realize that my education was glossing over crucial pieces of American history in relation to people of color. Here are some things I knew: The abolishment of slavery was passed by Congress January 31<sup>st</sup>, 1865 and ratified December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1865. Following slavery was the Reconstruction Era aka the 'ahhh! We don't have slaves to build this country anymore!' period. This period also marks the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. Following this, Black Americans push for the education of blacks and the de-segregation of establishments (including schools). Here are some things I didn't know: during this same time, Congress made it illegal for Native Americans to be taught in their native language. That Native American's weren't U.S. citizens till 1924. That public education wasn't extended to Chinese immigrants until 1905. This is all to say that a person of color in search of education would be difficult to find in American history. These facts should also be common knowledge.

Throughout high school, I found myself marginalized before empowered. This was true in the curricula and the way I was treated by my peers. There were few lessons that supported my humanity as a black person and woman. There were few lessons that had anything to say about black triumphs, though there were plenty repetitive anecdotes of black suffering. When black history was included, important black figures were treated like educational stock characters rather than real people who brought wreck to a world rooted in white supremacy.

This collection is a reflection of what I thought I knew and what I'm learning; it's a way to go back in time and speak on memorable vignettes when I felt othered. It took so long for me to find my place in a system that has consumed the majority of my life. Now, I get to be the main character.

The student teacher in your AP Literature class asks what 'Huck Finn taught us about the world we live in today?' Beside you, Virginia shouts *Racism is over*. You think of the security guard who followed you at Kroger when your mother sent you to check the price of milk. The guard looks down at you like sunbathing raw fish. When your mother asks why he stopped you, she already knows the answer.

## **You learned (misconceptions)**

feminism was bra burning and lipstick stains, that lynching were only few and far between, of white pioneers and their bravery, of friendship between the Pilgrims and Natives, that whiteness was American, ~~that~~ Malcolm X did not belong in classrooms, that you had to pick blackness or womanhood, that if {insert euro-name here} could not use the n-word neither could you, that white murder warrants a search team, that black death is everywhere, that nude shoes are tan, that brown shoes are brown shoes, that a white boyfriend is a cop-out, that a black boyfriend is expected of you, that love stories rarely feature *you*, that you're too sensitive, that there was something wrong, that you were lost, were mostly token, the bruised apple in the back of every classroom, your history comes in February, your parents are too foreign for American blackness.

Dear Laura Yes Yes, you moved me through high school. Your poems used to hold my hands and still wake me up at night and beckon me to read. I've shared you with a few boyfriends and that was a waste. They didn't understand your "Black Humor." They didn't laugh at you "Questions of Sexual Intelligence." This is okay. You weren't for them. Your poems are the only one ones I have memorized so far.

At a TGIFriday's, your speech team goes for dinner before day two of the state tournament. *The* state tournament. The one you had to compete twice just to qualify. Placing your sizzling fajitas in front of you, your waiter says *here sir*. Everybody knows the mistake she's made. Soon she does too. *Your hair is so short*. Your team tries to help. *You should have worn something more visible. Maybe pink.*

Dear Nikki Giovanni, we met when I was in fourth grade. One of my teachers took a picture of us. Your hand was on my shoulder and you were so jazzed to see me. On this day, as I sit and write you, “Allowables” comes to mind. I am so afraid of the world. Each morning is grey and they’ve taken the street lamps from my avenue rendering my walk home a dirty brown; the color they see my skin. I feel as you did and sometimes the spider too. Two women afraid of one another. How do I get past this? When does a woman become herself? I am still an “allowable” and I am still afraid but thank you for putting this sentiment to page. Thank you for keeping life sacred. Thank you for not shrinking when faced with tragedy.

In the back corner of a classroom, you are hesitant to answer questions. You're all reading of Janie's story and her men; a black woman at the forefront of unrelenting tragedy. You have always known there are limits to your peers understanding of black women and love, of you and leaving your small town. They see a slice of Janie's pain in you. It is terribly painful to be visible but such a waste to blend when black. You all finish the book and you're the only one limping. It's the same bullet that killed Tea Cake, the same that was meant for Janie.



Dear June Jordan, I learned of you far too late. I prayed you were alive before reading your Wikipedia. Imagine my surprise when I learned it was breast cancer. Imagine my tears welling as your voice crawls through my black feminist theory class. You were speaking of rage as a tool and how, sometimes, that feeling has a tendency to consume black women. Sometimes, rage takes me like a heavy wind to loose trash. I'm not ready to read you yet. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

In 2008, your permed hair sloughs off your scalp. A week later, you won a coupon to the hair school behind the local community college. You brought a book from the library to your appointment and point to a picture of a white woman with “beachy waves” and tell Tasha the Hair Student, *I want this, please*. A week after your cut and hot press, you finally wash your hair. It’s a teeny-weenie afro. You didn’t know you had an afro. You do now. At Thanksgiving, your whole family sees your new do. Two years later, blackness is back in fashion. Your whole family has afros.

Dear Nikkey Finney, you are my chosen family. When the words won't exit my pen, I turn to *Head Off & Split*. I've been reading you for three years. You said 'I've been really working on this for 30 years, exploring how those two paths intersect, the path where the beautifully said thing meets the really difficult-to-say thing'. I could have used this so long ago but I'm thankful I know this now. Something about "thirty years" makes me feel less heavy. We'll never stop processing. I am so full of 'difficult-to-say' things but have not quite mastered the voice yet.

Just before high school, your perm straight and side (cemented) swept bangs do not move as your head bops to Fall Out Boy. The ninety-nine cent eyeliner drips down the nook tears fall. Your friends are unsettled because you know all the lyrics to Panic! At The Disco and can also harmonize to Earth, Wind and Fire. You're really only allowed to be one thing at any given time with your white friends but they're your whole hometown.

Dear Kimberle Crenshaw, thank you for the word we all needed. I lean on it every day, several times a day. In high school, it felt right to choose. If I were with my black friend, I chose blackness. If I were with women, womanhood. If I were with my mom's family, Malawian-ness, my dad's family, Nigerian-ness. It's still so hard to be all of these things but there's power in being all of them—in being inextricable. You taught me that with one word. Thank you.