



SHOULDA  
BEEN JIMI  
SAVANNAH

POEMS

Patricia Smith

A NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST



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# Shoulda Been Jimi Savannah

POEMS

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*For all the families that have understood, nurtured, and sustained me.*

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*And for Bruce and Mikaila, always.*

## 1. OLD BACKDROPS DARK

How Mamas Begin Sometimes  
Still Life with Toothpick  
Keep Saying Heaven and It Will  
Before Orphan Unearthed the Mirror  
Fixing on the Next Star  
One Way to Run from It  
Annie Pearl, Upward  
Otis and Annie, Annie and Otis  
June 25, 1955  
Shoulda Been Jimi Savannah  
Chicago  
Tenzone  
3315 W. Washington, 3A  
Alliance

## 2. WE SHINED LIKE THE NEW THINGS WE WERE

A Colored Girl Will Slice You If You Talk Wrong about Motown  
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An Open Letter to Joseph Peter Naras, Take 2

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An Open Letter to Joseph Peter Naras, Take 3

Asking for a Heart Attack

Hip-hop Ghazal

Looking to See How the Eyes Inhabit Dark, Wondering about Light

Thief of Tongues

Motown Crown

*He said true things, but called them by wrong names.*

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—ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING



# OLD BACKDROPS DARK

# HOW MAMAS BEGIN SOMETIMES

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*For my mother, Annie Pearl Smith*

Raging tomgirl, blood dirt streaking her thick ankles and bare feet, she is always running, screech raucous, careening, dare and games in her clothesline throat. Playing like she has to play to live, she shoves at what slows her, steamrolls whatever damn thing won't move. Aliceville, Alabama's no fool. It won't get in her way.

Where's that girl going? Past slant sag porches, pea shuck, twangy box guitars begging under purple dayfall. Combs spitting sparks, hair parted and scalps scratched, mules trembling the back road, the marbled stares of elders fixed on checkerboards. Cursed futures crammed into cotton pouches with pinches of bitterroot, the horrid parts of meat stewed sweet and possible. And still, whispers about the disappeared, whole souls lost in the passage.

Frolicking blindly, flailing tough with cousins, sisters, but running blaze, running on purpose, bounding toward away. She can't tag this fever, but she believes it knows her, owns her in a way religion should. Toes tap, feet flatten out inside the sin of shoes. She is most times asking something, steady asking, needing to know, needing to know *now*, taking wing on that blue restless that drums her. Twisting on rusty hinge, that old porch door whines for one long second 'bout where she was.

But that girl gone.

# STILL LIFE WITH TOOTHPICK

---

*For my father, Otis Douglas Smith,  
and the grandparents I never knew*

Maybe his father grunted, brusque and focused as he brawled with the steering, maybe there was enough time for a flashed invective, some hot-patched dalliance with God. Then the Plymouth, sounding like a cheated-on woman, screamed into hurtled revolt and cracked against a tree.

Bone rammed through shoulder, functions imploded, compounded pulse spat slow thread into the road. His small stuttering mother's body braided up sloppy with foliage and windshield, his daddy became the noon's smeared smile. For hours, they simply rained.

It is Arkansas, so the sky was a cerulean stretch, the sun a patient wound. The boxy sedan smoldered and spat along the blistered curve while hounds and the skittering sniffed the lumping red river and blood birds sliced lazy over the wreck, patiently waiting for the feast to cool. The sheriff

sidled up, finally, rolled a toothpick across his bottom teeth, weighed his options. It was 'round lunchtime, the meatloaf on special, that slinky waitress on call. He climbed back into his cruiser and drove off, his mind clear. *Awfully nice of those poor nigras to help out. Damned if they didn't just drip right into the dirt. Pretty much buried themselves.*

# KEEP SAYING HEAVEN AND IT WILL

---

Otis is orphan in a very slow way. Relatives orbit the folded him, paint his parents to breath with stories that take the long way around trees, stories about the time before the two of them set out in the rumbling Plymouth, going somewhere, not getting there.

Otis is orphan in a very one way. Only one him. Only the solo with only happy stories to hear, no one says *car*. No one says *crash* or *never* or *dead now*. Everyone says *heaven*. They pat his head with flat hands, say *heaven* with all their teeth, say *heaven* with their shredding silk throats. They say *heaven heaven* while their eyes rip days down.

Otis is orphan in a very wide way. They feed him dripping knots of fatback, bowlfuls of peppered collards, cheap chicken pieces sizzled thick and doughy, stewed shards of swine. They dip bread in bowls of melted butter, fry everything, okra and tomatoes, fish skin, gizzards, feet. And the women shovel sugar and coconut meat into baking pans, slosh sweet cream into bowls and stir and bake and it is all everything for him for his little empty gut. They feed him enough for two other people, though no one says *two other people*.

Finally someone says *bodies*. Something about the souls having left them and thank God for that. Someone says *maybe just one casket*. He is eating peaches drifting in a syrup. They think he is a little boy too overloved to hear. But he knows days. And this new sound, *orphan*, which means that man and daddy are too close to be pulled apart. They are in one pretty place. But only one him, too adored and fattened. There will be a home for them to come back to. He is widening, practicing with his arms. He will be their first warm wall.

# BEFORE ORPHAN UNEARTHED THE MIRROR

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He was  
always told that he looked like everyone, everything—  
his mama's brother and sister, that loopy  
cockeyed chicken, that droop-titted store girl.  
Nosy folks even said he resembled Earl Lee's  
circling mule, or that crumpled picture of Jesus  
stapled to the kitchen. When you are not in  
the way that he was not, no one admits a root.  
Everyone had a hand or paw on him, steady  
testifying to the miracle of his standing,  
his dogged insistence upon breath. So one  
morning he just up and said good-bye.  
He swept his eyes slow over the spider  
cracks swallowing the crop, the toppled milk  
cans and slivered barn roof, his uncle's flat  
face, the pummeled tops of his own shoes.  
He said good-bye to a shred of his father  
folded into the trilling heart of a tree. *I'm  
leaving for Chicago* he told his aunt and uncle  
and they didn't even try hiding their hallelujah.  
All his nose, hands, and stride ever did were  
remind them of dead. They hated telling him  
how he looked like anything else, everything  
else. They were tired of pretending that his face,  
scratched and black, wasn't a record that just  
kept on skipping, playing that, that song.

# FIXING ON THE NEXT STAR

---

*Between 1916 and 1970, more than half a million African-Americans left the South and migrated to Chicago.*

Mamas go quietly crazy, dizzied by the possibilities of a kitchen, patiently plucking hairs from the skin of supper. Swinging children from thick forearms, they hum stanzas riddled with Alabama hue and promises Jesus may have made. Homes swerve on foundations while, inside, the women wash stems and shreds of syrup from their palms and practice contented smiles, remembering that it's a sin to damn this ritual or foul the heat-sparkled air with any language less than prayer.

And they wait for their loves, men of marbled shoulders and exploded nails, their faces grizzled landscapes of scar and descent. These men stain every room they enter, drag with them a stench of souring iron. The dulled wives narrow their eyes, busy themselves with clanging and stir, then feed the sweating soldiers whole feasts built upon okra and the peppered necks of chickens. After the steam dies, chewing is all there is—the slurp of spiced oil, the crunch of bone, suck of marrow. And then the conversation, which never changes, even over the children's squeals: *They say it's better up there*, it begins, and it is always the woman who says this, and the man lowers his head to the table and feels the day collapse beneath his shirt.

# ONE WAY TO RUN FROM IT

---

The damned boll weevil hisses his good-bye  
while cypresses drip low in steamed salute  
and satchel-toting travelers multiply,

affixed to that bright dream—the absolute  
reversal of their root. Their gospel hum  
dissuades the Delta dog, his resolute

pursuit of traitors' souls. The city's drum,  
the new unyielding, slaps old backdrops dark.  
Chicago, frigid siren, murmurs *Come*

while hiding how she fails—December's stark  
and violent entry into bone, the ways  
a factory's drone can siphon every spark

of will. She boldly lures them with clichés:  
the gilded path, the blur of black and white.  
Seduced, they set their Southern pasts ablaze.

Intent on fresh religions, taking flight  
without their wings, they're stunned in hurtling seats.  
*This train moans in a way that ain't quite right.*

# ANNIE PEARL, UPWARD

---

*Chicago*. She's heard the craving out loud, the tales of where money runs like water and after you arrive it takes—*what, a minute?*—to forget that Alabama ever held sweet for you.

She wants to find a factory that works ritual into her knuckles. She's never heard a siren razor the dark. She wants Lucky Strikes, a dose of high life every Friday, hard lessons from a jukebox. Wants to wave bye to her mama. All she needs is a bus ticket, a brown riveted case to hold her gray dress, and a waxed bag crammed with smashed slices of white bread and fat fried slabs of perch. With the whole in her chest, she knows what she's been running toward.

Apple cheek and glory gap-tooth fills the window of the Greyhound. For the upcoming, she has ho-combed her hair into shiver strings and donned a fresh-stitched skirt that wrestles with her curves. This deception is what the city asks. Her head is full and hurting with future until the bus arrives. She stumbles forth with all she owns, wanting to be romanced by some sudden thunder. She tries not to see the brown folks—the whipcloth shoe shiners, the bag carriers—staring at her, searching for some sign, aching for a smell of where she came from.

How does a city sway when you've never seen it before? It's months before she realizes that no one knows her name. No one says *Annie Pearl* and means it.

She crafts a life that is dimmer than she'd hoped, in a tenement with walls pressing in hard and full of roaches, sluggish with Raid, dropping into her food, writhing on the mattress of her Murphy bed. Daytime, she works in a straight line with other women, her hands moving without her. Repeat. Repeat. When her evenings are breezy and free and there is jiggling in her purse, she looks for music that hurts, cool slips of men in sharkskin suits, a little something to scorch her throat. Drawn to the jukebox, she punches one letter, one number, and "This Bitter Earth" punches her back, with its saffron indigo spin. Dinah settles like storm over her shoulders. And she weeps when she hears what happened to homemade guitars. How they've forgotten to need the Southern moon.



# OTIS AND ANNIE, ANNIE AND OTIS

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*My parents, then*

She's a gum-crackin', bowlegged, church-decent gal, raised up, looks like, by a mama who prayed and aimed her toward right. I feel a rumbling 'neath that skirt tho, some rhythm of city she left Alabama with, a little bit of Chicago that chile just couldn't keep outta her strut. Careful with this one, Otis, cause that gold flashin' in her mouth ain't intended for God. I'll dress like a real upright Christian for a few days, let her see me sharp and crease up and smellin' sweet. I'll say *Annie* like it's the first word I learned and the last one I'm gon' say. But I won't be crossing the line, having that woman think I'm the marryin' kind. She start dreamin' on a white dress and babies wearin' my face. Lawd, that ain't what I want.

Is there a life outside of Jesus? Then that's what I want, at least for a few days. Nights. I wanna put my hair up, pour myself into something shiny, open my mouth and say what I feel like sayin', for a change. Gon' buy me a gold dress with pearl buttons, a split up both sides. Cause I ain't a child no more, hanging onto Mama Ethel's hand. Next time you see me, you won't know who you're staring at, no way you look right past me. I'm an up-North woman now. It's about time Annie Pearl growed up, found work that ain't in dirt, learned some city words. Don't want nobody calling me *country*, folks thinkin' Alabama can't be shook off and thrown out. So I pray to God every night for that dress money. And maybe that man. He named Otis.

So I iron my good shirt, clean up, say "My name's Otis," and she smile behind her hand like she don't already know. I want to just rush thangs and feel all my body pressed on her, but God still a somebody in my head, and Annie Pearl still be His child. So she's saying things I should be hearing, but all I can see is stuff I'm not lookin' at—that rumble in her clothes, moon up 'gainst her skin, all that down-South brown looking just right up here on the West Side. I know she a little scared of the city, she dressed up like a big girl, putting on airs to make me think she more woman than she is. But she woman enough. I say, "You know, you look real pretty in that dress . . .," though the dress is plain, gray, and sewed flat. Then I add her name, ". . . Annie."

I go a little crazy at the way he say my name. He say, “Annie”  
like it’s the first word he learned. So I feel his name, Otis,  
in my mouth before it come out. Then I pull it out slow, and I see  
his eyes get real wide like he about to outright praise his God  
because of what I said and how I said it. Ain’t gon lie, chile,  
that felt good. But I ain’t foolin’ myself—he ain’t everything I want.  
Like me, he lookin’ for some kinda job, living in his one room, and I think  
I might not be the only woman he talkin’ to. But he’ll do me right,  
and I sho need some kinda strong man stand beside me in this city,  
while I find me a church and someplace better to live, a real address  
where folks from down home can find me when they take the bus up.  
So I say, “I been watching you a long time.” That’s what I say.

So I’m trying not to look at what I’m not looking at, and she say,  
all bold, “I been watching you a long time,” and I say “Annie,  
you sumthin’ else, you know?” but what I’m thinkin’ is, *God,*  
*we stuck in this little talk.* “You know, Miss Annie Pearl, I think  
we need to go someplace, have us some food, maybe up  
there on Madison, someplace close like that chicken joint right  
down the street from the tavern?” She smile and I swear I see  
something I hope I see again, what I think I see is some child  
in her, all worked up ’bout going someplace new in the city,  
even a hole-in-the-wall with burnt wings most folks don’t want.  
She say, stiff like white folks, “I-really-would-like-that-Otis,”  
but I see her frowning a little when she look down at her dress.

I woulda felt real slick walking into that chicken place in a dress  
with pearl buttons and splits on both sides, but Otis grin and say  
I look good in the dress I was in. That the first time I thank God  
for him, even before I took him in my bed, tasted his mouth, I think  
it was knowing he care ’bout me enough to lie, say I’m a pretty chile  
when I’m not. I feed him with my fingers, let him eat fried bread right  
off my plate while folks who know him whispering. I let them see  
who he was gon’ be with, the woman he was gon’ be pressed up  
’gainst from now on. Wanted to yell at them women “I’m the one he want!  
Tell everybody you know, here and in Alabama too. My name is Annie,  
and starting right now I want you to know that this is my man Otis.”  
Don’t know what made me think crazy like that. Sounding like the city.

Done heard it before, and now I’m ’bout to believe that the big city  
ain’t no place for a woman and man. Every day, that woman got to dress  
my wounds, hear about the ways I done got beat down, she get to see  
my head bowed all the damned time. I really try not to show my Annie  
how small I feel on the factory line, try not to let on how much I want

just for me, before I even *think* of me and her. Like a fool, she lift me up. I'm steady riding her shoulders, promising the world. It ain't right, that I can't give her what she's dreamin' on. I know she startin' to think maybe I'm not the man who deserves her gold. I'm just a plain Otis—damn if that ain't a country name—and at night I hear her ask God for something more. I play cards, sip my JB, run out of things to say to her. Cause she thinks a baby will save us. Lord, she wants a child.

I know, a woman got to be a natural fool to want to bring a child into this mess of broke glass and nailed-up doors, this goddamn city. That's right, country girl lose Jesus now and then, you heard me say it, goddamn, sometime I close my eyes and can't feel my God. I sit up at night, staring at them dirty city stars and waiting for Otis to knock on my door. I don't have to wait long, never do, cause I think that wherever he is he can feel me wanting. I hear him coming up my stairs, seems like slower each time, and when I open the door I see what I'm afraid I'll see, that maybe he got no idea at all what I really want. Maybe I done gave up on them pretty pearl buttons, that shiny dress. I don't touch him. He put his rough hands soft on my face, says "Annie, you want all of me, think I'm a marryin' man? Then let's make it right."

I can't look in her eye, seeing all that lonely, and think I got a right to keep being me instead of doin' right by the bowlegged 'bama chile I talked into loving me. My heart 'bout blows up when she say "Otis, you mean it? You mean it?" And I hear myself say yes. I pick her up and press her whole body to me and just for that second the city disappears, Chicago and all its lies are gone, and I say "Annie, you need to be my wife," and I know I'm sayin' it just so I won't see that longing in her no more. I can't believe I was fool enough to think I could have my drink and my fast city women, then come home, say "Baby, it's hard out there," and she would hold me, wearing that dress that's plain, gray, and sewed flat, and that all she'd ever want was just that—a cheater in her arms, steady making his promises to God.

I don't know how I'm gon' handle this thick in my body, God, without Otis knowing it. He's gon' be a father, and he sho' got a right to know that, to know that our lives gon' be changed way before we say them vows, he got a right to know how many ways this big ol' city gon' get harder for us, the three of us. When he come home, say "Annie, it's gon' be all right," he talking just 'bout just me and him—he adding up our money every week, trying to cut down on the times he see his other women, coming home for dinner most every night. Otis is probably somebody's daddy already, somewhere, so why I think this gon' hit him so hard? Maybe it's because I think this child

is gon' be everything we have—I'll feed it, rock it to sleep, dress  
it in pink or blue and pretend that it's all we ever gon' want.

---

So it look like Annie Pearl 'bout to get just what she want.  
I done seen pregnant women before, how they walk, cry how God  
suddenly got a place in everything they say. I sit her down, say “Annie,  
I ain't no boy. And I ain't no fool either. I know you carryin' a chile,  
and I know that chile is mine. Folks have babies all the time in the city,  
just like they did down South. Sure as my given name is Otis,  
I'm gon' be here with you, do you right, and I'm gon' have a say  
in how this child grows.” I know she scared. I know she think  
I might be the wrong man, that I can't hold still, and she right  
'bout that, but a chile can make a man change. We gon' fix up  
our lives, make a place for this baby. I'm gon' get her that gold dress  
'fore she get big, before her belly out there for everybody to see.

Otis could be the wrong man. So many folks saying I need to see  
that. So I pray on it. Most times, he's just a little of everything I want.  
When he don't come home for two, three nights, I ask God  
to change his ways, or at least keep him alive. When this hungry city  
open its mouth and he walk in again, I got no idea what words to say  
to get him home. When I hear 'bout them other women, how they dress  
tight, wear red lips and laugh with their mouths wide open, how Otis  
spend money on that laughing, how he rock me soft, saying “Annie,  
baby, it's hard out there,” while I get bigger and bigger with this chile,  
I just cry. And then I scream. Cause there's this pain like a knife slice right  
where my baby supposed to be. Whether that man here or not, I think  
this 'bout to happen. Chile moving fast, not giving me time to catch up.

*Whenever I think about Otis and Annie, two stars orbiting the city,  
there's no way I can say how they found each other. But I can see  
how the child who became Patricia Ann is equal parts of both of them.  
Otis and Annie, maybe with the help of some fool's God, etched a road right  
up Chicago's middle and placed a confounded child there. And that gold dress  
that Otis, my daddy, promised his Alabama girl? It never stopped being a want.*

# JUNE 25, 1955

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It is a backbreaker delivery, with no knife  
slipped beneath the bed to cut the pain.  
In a deep-bleached cavern of beeping  
machines and sterilized silver, she can't  
get loose. Her legs are strapped flat,  
and men are holding down her hands.  
She wails. Not from hurt, but from knowing.  
There will be no running from this.  
This child is a chaos she must name.

# SHOULDA BEEN JIMI SAVANNAH

---

My mother scraped the name Patricia Ann from the ruins of her discarded Delta, thinking it would offer me shield and shelter, that leering men would skulk away at the slap of it. Her hands on the hips of Alabama, she went for flat and functional, then siphoned each syllable of drama, repeatedly crushing it with her broad, practical tongue until it sounded like an instruction to God, not a name. She wanted a child of pressed head and knocking knees, a trip-up in the doubledutch swing, a starched pinafore and peppermint-in-the-sour-pickle kinda child, stiff-laced and unshakably fixed on salvation. *Her* Patricia Ann would never idly throat the Lord's name or wear one of those thin, sparkled skirts that flirted with her knees. She'd be a nurse or a third-grade teacher or a postal drone, jobs requiring alarm-clock discipline and sensible shoes. My four downbeats were music enough for a vapid life of butcher-shop sawdust and fatback as cuisine, for Raid spritzed into the writhing pockets of a Murphy bed. No crinkled consonants or muted hiss would summon me.

My daddy detested borders. One look at my mother's watery belly, and he insisted, as much as he could insist with her, on the name Jimi Savannah, seeking to bless me with the blues-bathed moniker of a ball breaker, the name of a grown gal in a snug red sheath and unlaced All-Stars. He wanted to shoot muscle through whatever I was called, arm each syllable with tiny weaponry so no one would mistake me for anything other than a tricky whisperer with a switchblade in my shoe. I was bound to be all legs, a bladed debutante hooked on Lucky Strikes and sugar. When I sent up prayers, God's boy would giggle and consider. Daddy didn't want me to be anybody's surefire factory, nobody's callback or seized rhythm, so he conjured a name so odd and hot even a boy could claim it. And yes, he was prepared for the look my mother gave him when he first mouthed his choice, the look that said, *That's it, you done lost your goddamned mind.* She did that thing she does where she grows two full inches with righteous, and he decided to just whisper *Love you, Jimi Savannah* whenever we were alone, re- and rechristening me the seed

of Otis, conjuring his own religion and naming it me.

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*After Carl Sandburg*

SOUL Butcher for the Country,  
Heartbreaker, Stacker of the Deck,  
Player with Northbound Trains, the Nation's Black Beacon;  
Frigid, windy, sprawling,  
City of Cold Shoulders.

They tell me you have lied and I believe them,  
for I have seen your Mississippi women stumbling  
Madison Street searching for their painted city legs.

And they tell me you are evil and I answer: Yes, I know.  
I have seen babies cooking their hair, fingering blades,  
changing their names to symptoms of jazz.

And they speak of souls you swallow, and my reply is:  
On the shadowed faces of men in the factory lines  
I have witnessed the beginnings of the furthest falling.

And having answered so I turn to the people who spit at my city,  
and I spit back at them before I say:

Come and show me another city with head thrown back wailing  
bladed blue, field hollers, so astounded to be breathing and bleeding.  
Spewing electric hymns rhythmmed against the staccato pound of  
fiery steel presses, here is a defiant ass whupper  
shaking its massive fists at sweating southern "towns";

Feral as a junkyard mutt, taut, muscled against his enemy, shrewd  
as an explorer pitted against an untried land,  
Wily as a Louisiana boy faced with days of concrete,  
Wiry-headed,  
Digging,  
Destroying,  
Deciding,  
Swallowing, expelling, swallowing,

Under the rubble, thrusting forth, laughing with  
perfect teeth,  
Shedding the terrible burden of skin, laughing as a white



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