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“The Spirits in My Mother’s Head”

Gina Athena Ulysse

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front cover, top row, left to right: Honoree Fanonne Jeffers, Evie Shockley, Nicky Finney, Lucille Clifton

front cover, second row, left to right: Nikki Giovanni, Edwidge Danticat, Tayari Jones, Patricia Smith

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cherise A. Pollard</td>
<td>Returns</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Child, Leaving</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camille Dungy</td>
<td>Poor Translation</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynne Thompson</td>
<td>Veal</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Vandyck</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nehassau deGannes</td>
<td>Ocean Voyager</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One Fine Philadelphia Morning</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latasha N. Nevada Diggs</td>
<td>about her</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khadijah Queen</td>
<td>November, 1941</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shannon Gibney</td>
<td>Note on a Number</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raina J. León</td>
<td>Philomela Teaches a Child to Sew</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikky Finney</td>
<td>Segregation, forever</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natasha Marin</td>
<td>Morphos</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Larva</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matilda Cox</td>
<td>the prophet of the laundromat</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia Spears Jones</td>
<td>Randy Crawford sings</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Knocking on Heaven's Door&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Last Seen Wearing (Sylvia Plath)</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Talk-Show Producer Keeps Calling (Sylvia Plath)</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tara Betts</td>
<td>Erasure</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia Smith</td>
<td>AN ALL-PURPOSE PRODUCT</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel Eliza Griffiths</td>
<td>Grief Requiem</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pecola Breedlove Gives Geraldine a Piece of Her Mind</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duriel E. Harris</td>
<td>&quot;The difference between dream and reality&quot;</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracy K. Smith</td>
<td>Erotics</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asha French</td>
<td>Why You Won't Stop</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber Flora Thomas</td>
<td>Swarm</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dear Reader</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikki Giovanni</td>
<td>No Heaven</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edwidge Danticat</td>
<td>postscript</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi W. Durrow</td>
<td>Dear Ms. Larsen,</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There's a Mirror Looking Back</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edwidge Danticat</td>
<td>Uncle Moise</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gina Athena Ulysse</td>
<td>The Spirits in My Mother's Head</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trellie James Jeffers</td>
<td>From the Old Slave Shack</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ada Udechukwu</td>
<td>Empty Vessel</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tayari Jones</td>
<td>Some Thing Blue</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honorée Fanonne Jeffers</td>
<td>Easter Lilies in the West Room</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deesha Philyaw</td>
<td>Bomani Jones</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacinda Townsend</td>
<td>Saint Monkey</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Notes on Contributors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Welcome to a very special issue of PMS— in fact, our first ever special issue, years in the making and beautifully and entirely edited by our long-time friend, Honoree Fanonne Jeffers. Although our regular issue for 2008, PMS 8 is really as much an anthology as anything else, a rare and fine collection of current black women’s writing, for the building of which I cannot thank Honoree enough. It’s the community that PMS pulls together that I love best and Honoree has pulled out all the stops to make this one, one of a kind.

Of course, there are always other folks to thank and for this issue, that includes the also-amazing photography queen Lynda Koolish who has made this cover the looker it is. Thanks too go to all our Friends of the UAB Creative Writing Program, the UAB School of Arts and Humanities, all my UAB editorial staff including my intern Hillary Matchen, and of course Russell, my hubster—all of whom work very hard to make sure this idea becomes a reality.

Finally, for all you writers out there, please note: we are changing our reading period! We will next accept submissions from January 1 through March 30, 2009. Check out our soon-to-be-revamped website at www.pms-journal.org for all updated info!

Welcome again, my friends, to a PMS like no other!

—Linda Frost
Editor-in-chief
The Renewed Sassy: A Sister Introduction

Two years ago, I approached Linda Frost, the editor-in-chief of PMS, about her publishing an all-black women's issue of the magazine. "I think it would be seriously sassy!" I said. Those who know me very well know that "sassy" is the most-used word in my entire vocabulary; mostly, it's an adjective, but I like to use it as a verb, noun, or even an interjection. When someone means to insult me—as in "you're trying to act sassy"—I insist on taking that as a compliment.

By the time I offered Linda my suggestion, I'd been featured in PMS twice (publishing both poetry and fiction), and I was more than a fan of the magazine; I was the "official patron saint." It wasn't difficult for me to spread the word; Linda's small magazine, operating with a small staff and an even smaller budget, showcases the best women's writing around. This isn't just my opinion; in only seven years the magazine either has won or been short-listed for several prestigious prizes, including the coveted "Best of" series.

Of course, when I was giving out unsolicited advice about the future of the magazine, I certainly wasn't thinking that I should guest-edit the issue. Who wanted to do all that work? A year later, when Linda asked, "Do you still want to put together that special issue for me?" I wondered what I had talked myself into. I'm glad now that I let my impulsive nature (and Linda) lead me on, because in the past year, I've become convinced that the time has arrived for a renewed conversation about contemporary black women's creative writing—about the collective body of work, not just that of the individual. Three events in particular have foretold this conversation: Elizabeth Alexander won the inaugural Jackson Poetry Prize; Lucille Clifton (or "Ms. Lucille" as she is known among her black poetry children) won the Ruth Lilly Prize; and Natasha Trethewey became only the third black woman to win the Pulitzer in poetry. And so, 2007—the time period when I put together this special issue—will forever be known as "The Year of the Super-Bad Sister."

What you will read here is by no means an exhaustive collection of our work. That would involve compiling many volumes, and even then, someone not yet heard of (or from) but already in brilliant bloom would be overlooked. Such is the case with this special issue. There are many writers I would have loved to include but simply couldn't contact; other writers I couldn't include because of page constraints. I have accomplished what I set out to do, however, which was to feature writers (read: sisters) whose work (read: sassy) I have long admired, but also, work by new and emerging writers. Although this is an introduction and not an acknowledgements page, I would be remiss if I did not express my gratitude for the generosity of those established (and downright famous) black women writers who allowed me to publish their previously unpublished work in this issue: Lucille Clifton, Elizabeth Alexander, Allison Joseph, Nikky Finney, Nikki Giovanni, Patricia Smith, Patricia Spears Jones, Edwidge Danticat and Tayari Jones. I'm thankful to Natasha Trethewey for consenting to be interviewed (by the wonderful Remica L. Bingham) in the midst of post-Pulitzer life; to Lynda Koolish for the use of her stunning photographs; and to Linda Frost for providing this all-important venue.

Finally, each issue of PMS features a memoir (by a woman relatively unknown as a writer) that discusses a topic of national importance. I took this opportunity to ask my beloved mother, Dr. Trellie James Jeffers, to write the story of her journey from poverty to college; I can think of no greater subject of national importance, and no greater metaphor for the necessity of black women's writing. We write because we have no choice as artists, but also (to paraphrase a poem by Ms. Lucille), we write because it has brought us "through this to that."

—Honoree Fanonne Jeffers
Guest Editor
had scattered her family, she said, and it was only death that brought us
together en masse these days. My most sorrowful moment came, how-
ever, on a Friday, three days after the funeral, when I tried to write Uncle
Moïse’s name in my computer and couldn’t find on my American key-
board the accent key that would place the fréma over the i in his name.
Then exile and loss became palpable to me. It is the calamity of living
and dying in a place where it takes uncommon effort to spell a fucking
name that you have known your entire life.

**Danticat**

Mother is the firstborn of eleven children. There had been thirteen but
two of them (both girls) passed away in infancy. She says very little about
life as a child. There are occasional stories about growing up. I know
that her parents worked the land and lived off the fruits of their labor.
Their lives were simple. Her father was a peasant farmer and Mgran
was a mizahan (market woman). She had been born and raised in Piti
Blan in Haiti. She was one of nine children (five boys and four girls).
Mgranfather, as I refer to my mother’s father, was from an area called
Kay Peshot, about three miles down the way. He had four siblings (three
sisters and one brother). Rumor has it that he had been interested in
Mgran’s sister and Mgran worked her charm and snapped him up.

Mother becomes a different person when she talks about her father.
On the few occasions when we would get to hear about him, she boasted
her feelings. She loved and adored him. The feeling was mutual. They
did everything together. They tended his garden together, planting corn,
pumpkin, peas and pitimi (millet). She had been his firstborn. In her rec-
collections of him, she talks about how he took her everywhere with him.
He was a respected man of conviction and power. A light-brown skinned
man whose lean and muscular body reflected his métier. The other thing
that everyone in the community knew about him was—as one of our
popular saying goes—the piti anken pate foi: he didn’t eat any cold
patties. In other words, he didn’t take any bullshit. He too comes from a
long line of vouOUSIants. The most powerful spirits in his family danced
in his head. They walked with him. And for that reason, he was the kind
of man that no one dared to mess with because he was just and could
protect his own.

Mother is always full of regret when she whispers the known details
of his death. No. I won’t tell. I promised I would not. Suffice it to say that
her father’s end came too early. He became ill suddenly and was sick for
twelve years. He continued to work. Once he became bedridden, he died
within two months. His death was, in many ways, a warning to mother.
It was how she learned how far people would go to amass spiritual power

**Gina Athena Ulysse**

**The Spirits in My Mother’s Head**

Mother is the firstborn of eleven children. There had been thirteen but
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within two months. His death was, in many ways, a warning to mother.
It was how she learned how far people would go to amass spiritual power
by capturing spirits that were not really theirs. She views his death as the catalyst that changed the course of her entire life. She often swears by this. Had he been around, she would say, he would have prevented many of our misfortunes and all of her tragedies.

To lessen her burden, Grandma sent Mother to Petion-Ville to live with a sister who worked as a pastry chef for Cabane Choucoune. In those days, Cabane Choucoune was the hotel destination for North American and European stars. Such arrangements are common in Haiti. They don't always have the intended result. Children of the lesser fortunate are sent to family members who are better off.

Father was the only son of the only daughter of great-grandmother. They lived in the house in Petion-Ville and operated a storefront on the property that had been in their family for some time. He was a studious type whose mother hoped that at some point he would attend the seminary. He became sick and stopped school.

Father and Mother met when her aunt moved into one of the rental houses in the Rue Darguin lakou (courtyard). They stayed there for three months and moved closer to Rue Chavannes. Mother had been sixteen. The story of their romance became less and less romantic over the years. They were on and off for ten years. For now, I'll just stick with an earlier version. In spite of all the other boys who were checking her out, she settled on him even though there were signs of disapproval from both families. She wasn't exactly what father's mother and grandmother had in mind for their only son. Her uncle and aunt openly disapproved and repeatedly beat her and ran after her, as they did not want her to be with him. But he was helpful to her especially with the needs of her younger brothers and sister. He used to buy them their schoolbooks. She realized that she needed him since, as the eldest, she felt responsible for her siblings.

Love conquered all and they got married. She was twenty-six. It was a grand wedding. She had six attendants. Several of her classmates at the sewing school she attended made her wedding dress. There were tons of food and drink.

As family stories go, the day of the wedding, a serious thunderstorm brewed. Bad sign. Somehow Mgran had been left in the rain after the church ceremony. When she arrived at the reception, wet and in total disarray, she was possessed with Gede, the master of the crossroads. It is he who oversees the boundaries between life and death. This spirit who had mounted Mgran was enraged. He wailed and cried that this was a big mistake. The family spirits did not want it. Gede insisted that he had lost this child. The marriage was doomed. The wedding should never have taken place. Yes... I know it sounds just like a treatment for a movie.

* All I know is the woman, my mother, who used to make the neighborhood boys' hearts skip a beat, the one whose friends whistled and said Gade on bebe (Check out this label or better yet, What a woman!) and who proudly boasted of knowing multiple ways of tying a headscarf, began to fade. The cheekbones were still high, she still dressed up. But it was clear, if you knew her then, that she was not as present or strong or engam, as we say in kreyol. Her declining weight had made her lose the curves that signaled to everyone that things were ok. There was plenty of food. We had no problems. Fact is she was in battle, fighting illnesses that sent her to doctors of all kinds. More whispers that no amount of calculated eavesdropping could explain.

To find peace, Mother would leave that house and take off with the three of us kids in tow. Sometimes, young Uncle J.R. and Aunt E. accompanied us. We stayed with close friends. Then we went back to the house again. Family. Then back again. I know little about this period. My remembrances from years seven to eleven are especially miniscule. In attempts to recreate my past, I have revisited a lot of these to find only unsettled bits. There was more sickness. Less money. One night here.

Directives. Instructions. Don't ever repeat what you are about to see. Am I making these up? My sisters and I continued to do exceptionally well in school. Several months later, another night there. Turbulence. Mother began to get possessed more often. I don't recall any tears from the sisters or myself during those moments of possession or visits from the spirits. Things were up and down. What brings a smile to my face is the recollection that once the spirits came, things were ok. Everything got better until the next episode and then they came again. Something to look forward to.

Ogu was my favorite because he was so strong. When he came to visit, all of a sudden weak mother became the strongest woman-man alive, a shaman who ran with wolves. Fearless. Someone no one would even consider fucking with. Her mother and father's daughter. I was in awe. In love. We would learn that it was him as her body went absolutely rigid...
and the faintest whistle began to escape her puckered mouth. As the tune came out, he announced himself. Adults rushed to go get the scarves hidden deep in the back of the armoire. He would shake his head until his appropriate color, red, was found. This was tied just above his elbow. Did he have one or two scarves? I think it was two. The bottle of five-star Barbancourt rum was passed to him. He'd ask for his sword, then demand to see the young ones of the house. Kote piti kay yo? Before they dealt with adults, spirits always asked for the young first. If any one of us was not there, he could tell. He began his mission only after sending someone to go find the absent child. If this child was at someone's house who didn't live far, adults were actually instructed to go get him or her. And they did, right then in the middle of the night. Out of respect they must, because not even adults could say no to spirits.

All the kids would stand in a row as he took us one by one and greeted us. He took giant swigs of rum that he spit out like a sprinkler over his bent elbow. We were instructed to close our eyes. A shower of benedicction fell over our heads. Sometimes the rum from his mouth was rubbed vigorously between palms until it became warm and smacked loudly on each elbow, knee and head. This was to strengthen our joints. If a part of the body was sick, then rum was applied directly on the area of sickness. He used to knock his forehead against mine a couple times as it eventually became evident that we had a special thing, he and I. Where's little Gina? He'd ask. Mon mwen wi. Here I am. Or Mwen la. I'm here. I would say in a small voice as I raised my eyes from the floor and moved away from behind the adult leg in front of me.

Knowing what I know now, I am sure at some point in the beginning this had to have been scary. Imagine being a child and being hoisted up toward a ceiling with one hand while he brandished his sword like an expert marksman. This is my child. No one will harm her. And he was my knight in shining armor. Someone, something that is bigger than life has made himself my protector. But soon it became normalcy. A treat. Visits from the spirits became something to cherish. It is not every day that mother became a fifty-foot woman and promised to destroy anything—I mean anything, or anyone wishing her household harm. You have heard of her; you know the mother who in a nanosecond gained enough strength to lift a car to save her child's life. A superhero. What a woman! Then the spirits would make their departure. A special message or instructions would be left for mother until the next visit. The spirit communicated this to an adult who would make promise would pass it on to her, ti famn. Sometimes, the message was the same warning to mother, as she refused to listen. They all began the same way. These started with the same words: di chwal la. Tell my horse. As children, we were not as privy to the details of the message.

When Gede would come, I got secretly happy because he could do what we were forbidden to as children. He was an expert in bètiz, curses or dirty words. In our house, saying a bad word was as bad as raising your voice at an adult or getting into a fight with another kid at school. For punishment, we had a fresh horsewhip that got its uses. Or our mouths were literally washed with the ash-made soap. Needless to say, it was always fun to have Gede visit. In his special songs, he would use all bètiz I knew but was never supposed to say and other words that I had never heard before. He was so bad that he would make the adults shriek the minute he arrived. They would beg him to be careful because there were young ears around and we had Catholic school the next day. This would get him going even more. He'd add a special dirty joke about nuns. When he talked, he sounded like he had a really terrible cold and his nose was stuffed up. Sometimes his mouth was so dirty that we would be told to cover our ears. He really loved children—totally, absolutely adored them like they are yummiest thing in the world. Whatever he had to share with us. If any adults said anything at all, he would chastise them: The spirits' love for children was such that no one would even dare evoke them to discipline us. Unlike the masked chaloska that used to scare us into submission during Carnival season, vodou spirits were there for love, healing and protection. They instilled fear in adults when they crossed the line. They brought and promised terror especially to those who refused to let any of their own live in peace.

As we were getting older, there were fewer unspoken wars among the grownups (grownups) at the house. The battle over taking a daily dose of cod liver oil stopped. By now, I had figured that a grimace would help me swallow it down, especially if I pinched my nose. Things were getting tight. Tougher. Outside, in the lakou, people still sat around to tell stories. In the middle of the day, the topics varied. There was more talk about food shortages. When adults got together indoors before the whispers
began, they complained about how difficult it was to find certain kinds of rice, or how much a *gwo mamit* (large tin can) of *pwa frans* (green peas) costs. A long time ago, local market women came up with their very own system of measurement that is based neither on the metric or imperial systems. Instead, they use various sizes of cans. At the markets (not stores) all over the country, you can't ask for a kilo or a cup of sugar or cornmeal, but you can find a *mamit*. The largest *mamit* is as big as that can of Folgers coffee that you buy in the bulk section of the supermarket and that offices have in their cabinets. You could buy a half of either size *mamit*. Back then things were sold in even smaller quantities like a sachet or bag of sugar for five centimes, ten centimes, or twenty-five centimes. But that was also when the Haitian gourde was guaranteed five to one of the US dollar. Five centimes then equaled but a penny. Let me put it this way. Back then five centimes could also buy you sugar or flour. As my mother says, now it won't even buy dust.

During those years, there were times when certain items could not be found unless you knew somebody who knew somebody who knew someone else. If you had family members who farmed and grew things, the lack wasn't felt the same way. They would send provisions up to those of us living in the city. I was really finicky about food textures. There were certain things that you just could not get me to eat. Strings got tighter for us. We were eating more of the same things. Less variety. I have vivid recollection of a fight one night over my refusal to eat the night supper: *la bouyi banan* (plantain porridge). Mother came at me and pointed out that there were people in this country that didn't have food to eat and here I was acting like I was an elite. In the end, of course, I ate it. Years later, while in graduate school, the smell rushed me and beamed me right back to the gingerbread house in Haiti.

---

**From the Old Slave Shack**

*From the old slave shack I chose my lady
from the harsh garden of the South...*

Lance Jeffers, “Trellie”

By the time I entered high school, I was convinced that I was a very bright girl. I had been told this by my elementary teacher, Mrs. Roland, when I began attending Flat Rock Elementary School at the age of four. Mrs. Roland was a heavyset lady with piercing gray eyes. She had the reputation for being mean. Her reputation was well deserved; she was the only teacher who spanked me throughout my elementary school days. Yet she praised me for already knowing my alphabet; my numbers from one to ten; and how to write all the names, with correct spellings, of my immediate family members.

From the first grade through the third grade, I was my elementary school’s spelling champion as well as the oratorical champion; I tutored my classmates in math; I could recite every verse of Longfellow’s poem, “The Psalm of Life” as well as Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Church-yard,” and Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s “In the Morning.” I learned every line and every cue of any play that was presented at either school, whether I was in the play or not; and I set the curve for all my high school math and science classes—at a perfect one hundred points.

My teachers and people in the community who attended school functions had given me standing ovations each time I performed in a play or recited a poem or sang a song. Their ovations were further proof to me that I was smart; therefore, there was no doubt in my mind as I approached high school graduation that the goal of beautician on which I had set my sights was firmly within my reach.

*Throughout my school years, I had compared my life to many of my classmates, and that comparison had taught me the undisputed fact that...*