

Zoom Interview with Poet Nikky Finney (2021)

Conducted by Clemonce Heard

Heard: Without further ado, I'll try out this intro for Nikky Finney. Here we go: Nikky Finney, from lovechild of the tactile image to analog girl in a digital world, born and raised in South Carolina, born and raised in rock-skipping and whiffing distance of the Atlantic, born and raised during the Civil Rights, Black Power and Black Arts Movement, started keeping a journal at 9 or 10. Nikky Finney "sometimes I feel like a child of war", Nikky Finney "not finna dance with Strom Thurman philibustin'", Finney "no groove, Finney no bust a move", is the author of five collections of poetry and one novel. Finney, growing up in the spectacle and human theatre of the Deep South, has earned numerous awards, including the National Book Award for *Head Off and Split* and the "Beautiful Human Award" from yours truly. Nikky Finney publishes a book every 8-10 years. Nikky Finney makes us wait like Frank Ocean but like Frank, the wait is always worth it. Nikky Finney's latest collection is titled *Love Child's Hotbed of Occasional Poetry*, and out of all her collections, it is my favorite, from the work to the hardcover section. Nikky Finney, I am honored and humbled to hear your poems and have this conversation with you this evening. Welcome.

Finney: Hey, Clemonce.

Heard: Hey!

Finney: How are you? Wow, that was a beautiful introduction! Can I get a copy of that please, sir? I'd appreciate it.

Heard: I will send it to you. I mean it's your words so...

Finney: I heard that! I heard what you were doing. That was beautiful, thank you. Hello Oklahoma City, Oklahoma! Hello everybody listening to us. I guess you could say this, Clemonce. They might think we met before this moment, but this is our – this is our origin story, ooo! And we just met, and Tracy has pulled us together in this moment and we've been talking a little bit before, just kind of bouncing back and forth. I'm so happy that we are doing this. Thank you, Tracy, for putting it in this set because I miss live readings, and I miss feeling people near me, and hearing either that somebody agreed with something, or confused, or you know whatever the sounds a human makes being made. So, I really appreciate this kind of pairing for the audience listening in, I really do. I miss the human face as I'm reading. [chuckles]

Heard: Nice! Are you ready to get started?

Finney: I am, I am.

Heard: Okay so-

Finney: Oh! Before we get started, can I just say congratulations on the Anhinga Poetry Award? That's beautiful! And I can't wait for *Tragic City* to come out, because now I get an autographed copy. [laughs] Okay now we can start! [laughs]

Heard: Definitely getting an autographed copy. So, through email we've been discussing National Poetry Month and the fact that it's always draining. I first wanna start off with How are you doing? Then we'll get into some of the workshop stuff, and we'll just go right in.

Finney: Okay! I'm doing good. I'm doing really great. It's really busy. I fell asleep on the couch today because, as I told you yesterday, I had to get my 92-year-old aunt vaccinated. So, it was Vaccination Day! So, I was rushing to do that, and my 87-year-old mom is already vaccinated and so she spent the night with my aunt. And as the oldest female grandchild, there's some responsibility that I know belongs to me. And one of them was what we did yesterday to get my aunt vaccinated. So, I'm doing really well. Really well. It's a busy, lovely time.

Heard: I'm glad, I'm glad. You taught an ekphrastic workshop yesterday – and for those who don't know the word “ekphrastic” it just means art in conversation with other art. Historically, it's been writing in conversation with visual art, but it can be any art speaking to another. And so, Nikky Finney taught a stellar workshop last night that I was honored to be in, and we broke down a lot! So, I wanted to just get into ekphrastic poetry because your latest collection has a lot of it. And it also has, as the title suggests, occasional poetry and then these things that you call “hot beds”. So, I'll just say this and then we'll get into it: I've been reading that you have, I think two uncles that are both photographers? I remember reading about an “Uncle Bobby” at the beginning of the book—

Finney: Yes!

Heard: But then I thought I heard about an “Uncle Billy”

Finney: Yes.

Heard: So, there were two, and they were both photographers!

Finney: Both. One's on my father's side, Uncle Bobby, and the other is on my mother's side, that's Uncle Billy!

Heard: [chuckles] Okay, so photography has just been surrounding you for your entire life. And I remember in one interview, you were talking about how there was this case that all the equipment came in, all these lenses, and you weren't supposed to open it but, of course, what do you do? You open it! Just thinking about all the lenses and that visual image, and how your poems are so descriptive; they just course and course through. So, I was thinking about a few things, I was thinking firstly about a dear friend of mine named Tiana Clark who said in an interview that she thinks all poetry is ekphrastic. And I believe you know who this is because she has you in a poem! Did you know that?

Finney: No!

Heard: Okay! [laughs] So she has you in a poem and I'm going to read just a part of it, is that okay?

Finney: Okay, yeah that's great!

Heard: So, this poem is called “Mixed Bitch”, and it says, “She wants to tell Nikky Finney about her beautiful black girl arms // How they shimmer and shimmy in space, making muscle songs of the tendons in the dark matter beef.”

Finney: [flexes arms and grunts]

Heard: So, Tiana Clark is a poet who works a lot in ekphrastic poetry and image, and whose works spirals like yours. I want to get into these questions but before that, I was wondering if you'd mind reading the poem "Magnolia Garden Homes, High Noon, Unit #144, Parking Lot H". [chuckles]

Finney: Ekphrastic poem #2 in *Love Child's Hotbed of Occasional Poetry*. "On the occasion of swimming with a pencil behind my ear, into a photograph by Preston Gannaway— *Teddy and Chris #1*, 2013. (And I just have to say that this photo comes out of a collection, a book, an exhibit called *Southbound*, where photographers from all over the South entered their photographs to be chosen for this book.)

Kudzu arm lover, the one who gives my thighs their bass
& drumroll, our backyard needs more art, I offer us, volunteer, me
& you, here, in our open fort of love, before the sirens wail and
while they continue to decipher the 8-alarm call from the screaming old man
in window #142, his arm and Bible outstretched
like twin crosses in the air, while they slow roll the front gates,
approach with loud blue lights, silently spinning, keep your blue berry
lips where they are, filibuster and plunge more smoke, eek and sting
inside my ear, We are here, Baby, now, let the sun be the artist it is
with everything else that wants to live & breathe, let
the sun etch and burn us into more than just an unwanted sight
in the back lot of our Magnolia Gardens, let the sun chisel us
into the land and geography, bake us, into more than a
high burning wall of squired lips & thighs, sweet man made just for
me, male honey & hive, hold your chin up next to mine,
we are being solemnly watched, the artist needs to get us right, baked into clay and statue.
Turned into magnolia and ivy and purple clematis
Ready to grow slow and fat, wrap our feet and legs, summer & winter
someone will be sent in overalls to attend to us like they attend to other fine obelisks of great import
other conspicuous monuments in the park, etched portentously where lovers nibble and whisper
I want him, or her, or them, to have a steady hand, to trim and clip us here &
there, for forever, and for two days after that, keep our lover's lush stance intact
Who, who if not us,
should make our winding hungry jet bodies permanent in the eyes and
arms of the garden, tonight, while others die walking and
running in the dark from the blue barking orders to stop, to freeze,
but here in our man-made sculpted hot-bed, we won't stop,
we will stand on our lover's ground, two soft muscle men,
two diamond hard tongues, one doo rag, hewn & cut in
blazing black marble."

Heard: So, I read this poem and of course I fell in love, which is why I wanted to start with it. But also, because I wanted to start with love. I mean that *is* this book, 'Lovechild'! [chuckles] But that's all of your books, and I remember you, correct me if I'm wrong, from another interview speaking of Li Young Lee, and him saying that all his poems are love poems, that he *only* writes love poems.

Finney: That's true!

Heard: I remember you agreeing, and you have a poem that you dedicated to Li Young Lee! There's just so much love, and I'm interested in thinking about love and danger in this poem. My question is, away from the fact that you were raised a lovechild, fertilized with tenderness and thoughtfulness and purity and so much more, what are the organs of a love poem? What makes a love poem for you, and then how do you balance the difficulty of what happens on the other side of love?

Finney: So, I have to talk about how I too fell in love, with this photo! I'm going through a mound of pictures of human beings in the South— *I'm* Southern, I'm a black girl born and raised in the South, and I get to this one and I go "Woah, wait!" I have to swim through this! Each of the ekphrastic poems begins with the line "On the occasion of swimming with a pencil behind my ear, into a photograph", and then gets specific to that photographer. But I thought I want to write about the love, I want to write about the danger, I want to write about this picture of these two *loving*, just the posture of the bodies and the magnolia tree in the background, and that this is a book on *Southern* photographs. Included with the Confederate Flag, included with juke joints, is this picture that is not supposed to be "Southern", right? It's not supposed to be "allowed". The South Carolina legislature and other legislatures around the country are working their best to not allow such pictures and such *people* to exist on this plane, in this land. So, I wanted to pluck it out and write about it, and I thought I want to write about it like we're in a grand garden in the South, and these two beautiful men should be the center of that garden. Other people who love and understand tenderness and understand how precious it is should float *around* them. This should be the heart of what is there, and so the whole notion that they will be there so long that things will begin to grow around their feet and arms and around their beauty, and that someone will come and clip it away— this will be the mantra, this will be the sign that says love. And I thought oh yeah, that'll break some taboos, that'll do some things for me as a writer that I love to do with the visual image. The photograph sparked something in me when I saw it and I wanted to be attached to it as a poet, which is why I chose it. And then I had to bring in "High Noon, Unit #144" because I had to bring in the person in #142 who was staring at them, fictively but not, and allow them to continue this moment of deep love and affection even though there might be someone in the world who might call the cops on them!

Heard: Mhm, yeah.

Finney: Thank you for pulling this out, and the audience doesn't know that Clemonce has really done the research, which is another beautiful thing about being in this conversation. And I said "Yeah, go for it! Pull the poem you want, and we'll talk about it." And I love that, because I always find something, Clemonce, that I wasn't thinking about when I hand the reins over to someone else. I'm not afraid of that, I love that because I'll find out something that I love thinking about a little bit more.

Heard: Thank you for trusting me.

Finney: Yes, yes!

Heard: Okay, so I mentioned the other side of love— where desire's still there but it is desire going the wrong direction. And so, I was thinking about your poem, "Florissant", is that the right—

Finney: "Florissant" [said with French inflection]. I say "Florissant" because that's what it was named after, but the people from "Florissant" say it with less of a French accent.

Heard: I want to read but beforehand, I just want to give a warning for those who might be activated (triggered) by violence, specifically sexual assault against women, this poem contains several images of violence. Please, make whatever adjustments you feel are necessary to protect your own sensitivities. Could we read that poem and then talk about it?

Finney: Absolutely, and I want to talk about something really quick. When you said that statement at the beginning, when I was reading a poem about these two lovers, right? And then when you said, 'the other side of love', I thought what is he talking about? Because I don't think this is the other side of love. I want to say *that*. I feel like this is not that, what we just talked about. So, let's talk about that when we get there.

Heard: Okay.

Finney: So, this has an epigraph: "On the occasion of Dr. John Johnson speaking on *Good Morning America* about his daughter, Private First-Class LaVena Johnson, this poem has now been entered into the Congressional Record of the United States of America in the names of thousands of women enlisted and assaulted in the U.S. Armed Services". And that second part is important because I was going around reading this poem all across the country, in the old country back when I used to be physically present, and there was a woman in the audience who was a reporter; she was testifying before Congress about violence against women in the Armed Services, and she came up to me afterwards and said "Would you give me permission to take your poem and enter it into the Congressional Record as a statement about the violence women face in the Armed Services?". I said absolutely and handed it to her, and I thought about how a poem you're reading, because you believe it so much, can infuriate you so deeply. And how that poem was heard by someone *testifying* for those women you were talking about.

Florissant

"Before or after he used the back end of an M-16 and struck her in the face

Before or after he took his fist and knocked her 19-year-old teeth out

After or before he broke her nose,

Before that, the Florissant, Missouri Honors Student who loved to play the violin

Who every year made time to walk for the American Heart Association

Decided to put college off for a while

Decided to serve her country first

And enlisted in the Army

Deployed straight away to Balad, Iraq

Where for all of her 6 weeks, she was a communications specialist

LaVena called home everyday

Her mother, Linda, answered

So glad to hear her upbeat daughter say

'Mama, I'm coming home'

The 5-foot-1-inch, 101-pound American Heart Association volunteer was found in a burning tent

With bite marks on her upper body

The arm and elbow that once held her violin, now broken and distended

Her 19-year-old genital area badly bruised

'lacerated', the Army Report reported.

Before he struck his match

This, the only time he was dutiful,

He carefully and sincerely lifted her hips with one hand

To pour the hot lye into her womb with the other

Burning away all evidence of his having been there.

After all this, the Army Report read 'suicide'

Dr. John Johnson, father of LaVena, filed for his freedom of information

Then wrote another report

Let's call it the Father Report.

A report a father should never have to write

A report a country should write

The Army reported the bullet hole was found on the left side of her head,

Adding it was made by LaVena's Army-issued M-16

But my LaVena was right-handed, the Father Report reported.

How do you take a 40-inch M-16, when you are right-handed,

and curl your 5-foot-one-inch arm around in the air

And shoot yourself on the left side of your head?

The Army man, the Father, will tell you more, much more

If you have the stomach for the details.

If your love for your country does not impair your entire affection for the facts.

The hole in LaVena's head was made by a pistol, unfound, un-looked for, Army-issued pistol.

Dr. John and Linda Johnson made the Army release the photographs from the murder scene

Pictures reveal the bloody path where LaVena was dragged through the woods

To be the soon-to-be burning tent.

Pictures show the remains of dry Iraqi flowers and leaves stuck to LaVena's body

As if she was dragged a long, long way

The Army reported that the tent belonged to KBR, Private Military War Contractor,

Child of Haliburton, and that is where the path ends.

The tent was burning.

Dr. John Johnson's broken heart tells the CBS Morning News the tent was burning.

In the burning tent, LaVena Johnson's 19-year-old body was fully dressed

Ready, prepared, for the day's full inspection.

Even though the one white dress glove on her right hand had been glued perfectly into place

There are no warning signs nailed over recruitment doors for 19-year-old Honors Students

Who grow up believing they should make time in their lives to walk for others.

Fighting for a better world, made of stronger hearts

There are no warning signs nailed over recruitment doors for 19-year-old Honors Students

Who grow up loving to play the violin

The dotted line you signed, LaVena, should have included earlier reports

That your father and your mother never saw,

Not until they saw your autopsy photos.

It is the report that every mother and father and family of every daughter

Signing up to fight for her country must now learn by heart.

Raise your right hand

Repeat after me:

Every woman entering these gates

Has a higher chance of being raped by a fellow soldier

Than being killed by enemy fire."

As you're coming back on, Clemonce, I just want to say that I wrote this poem a long time ago when the

report of LaVena's murder came out. Because I was furious, and I wanted to do something as a poet, I

wanted to do something as an American, I wanted to do something as a woman, I wanted to do

something as a human being. She was gone, 19 years old, there's her father on TV *asking for an*

investigation. Asking the United States of America to do something. To find the killer of his daughter. Nothing was done. The case was closed, and *suicide* was put on her file. I was furious, I was incensed, I want to tell her on the Other Side of this life that I will never stop thinking about her. That whoever murdered her and did the other horrific things to her body got away with something that I don't ever want to stop talking about. And, I'll just add, this reporter named data and statistics – which is why the end of the poem says what it does – because, I say LaVena's name, right? But there are thousands of other women whose names aren't called. I think that's partly the job of the poet, I really do. I want to write about the beautiful magnolia trees. I want to write about the poppies coming up and things like that. I enjoy that as a poet and a human being. But I think it's partly my responsibility as a poet, as a person who loves beauty *and* truth to speak to both of those things.

Heard: I think you have telepathy because you pretty much answered the question I was gonna ask you. And I just want to say thank you for reading that poem and for writing that poem. And I know for fact that there are women in the armed forces who are actually in the audience tonight. I know that they appreciate it as well. In an interview you did with [Walter Most?] he stated that “poetry is one of the few arts that cut to the bone, that struggle to swallow the most bitter pill of mortality...which is the truth.” And in the poem you just read, it's definitely the truth – as bitter of a pill as it is. I wanna know, in this poem but also in your other poems, how do you tend to such violence without smoldering in pure anger and fright? And without the poem becoming this flat line? How do you manage that and still keep yourself together?

Finney: I manage it and I do it because I want to. I wanna figure it out. You know those trapeze artists and they have the pole in their hands? And they're tip-toeing, have their ballet shoes on, and there's a 2,000-foot drop if they look down? That's what I feel like when I'm writing a poem like that. I wanna hold LaVena's life in my hands. I wanna tell the truth about her – I don't wanna embellish. I go and I do my research. I get the fact about the Iraqi flowers. I get the fact that he glued her hand in that glove. I get the fact that some substance like Lye was poured into her womb so they couldn't do a rape kit on her. And then you put suicide on her file? And nobody is outraged but her mother and father? As a country we should be outraged. We allow this to happen and then we bring these young people home and we wonder why mental health issues abound. We wonder why we don't have the proper systems in place. It's like we're not sending human beings to war, to participate, to “protect and serve” the country. When they come home what do we have for them to say we see you, we honor you? It's like we just use up human beings and we get another set. That's what it feels like to me. I haven't been in the armed services. But I've talked to women who have been and I won't be silent about this. I won't. It matters to me deeply.

Heard: We're all thankful that it matters to you as deeply as it does. I definitely wanna get to at least one Hotbed, which we will. But before then, I'm thinking about your attraction to multiple meanings. To etymology. I'm thinking about how when I first heard the title *Lovechild's Hotbed of Occasional Poetry*, when I saw hotbed I was like “Okay, Nikki! Alright, if that's what we doin', that's what we doin'! Let's go!” I was ready! But then I looked up hotbed and I was like “Oh this has to do with gardening.” [laughs]

Finney: [laughs] Calm down, Clemonce!

Heard: [laughs] I know for a fact I'm not the only one!

Finney: Right, right! [laughs]

Heard: But I know lovechild is also a negative until your father let you know you were made in love. And to let you know that there are other things black women are called but you shouldn't believe those. You should believe the one that he gave you which is Lovechild. And that occasional poetry is just poetry for an occasion, but it can also sound like something else. Like "Occasionally I write poetry." So there are so many multiple meanings and I thought about the title – which dawned on me over the last week – of your collection before *Head Off & Split* – which won a national book award – I thought about that collection. And what I thought about was like "You know, I've caught fish, I've cleaned fish" but "Head Off & Split" I've never heard because I've never been to a fish monger. But then I thought about the title poem of *Head Off & Split* and how in the poem, the speaker is leaving. I thought about "Head Off" to head off somewhere or heading off. And I thought about "Splitting" split means to leave. So, you do this thing where you pack as much meaning in your words as possible. Before I ask you to read the poem, I was wondering if you could talk about your affinity for language and what you believe those layers (of love, danger, etymology, etc.) add to your work? And the work you adore?

Finney: I love words. I find worlds in words. And I have found those worlds since I was a young person. And I have trusted the definitions of words and the etymology and the root – root can go through my gardening stuff too - because you gotta go to the root of the thing, right? Because there's so many people in the world – and we've seen this in the last four years, we've seen it throughout the history of America – who will take a word and change the meaning of it to whatever they need it for. If somebody runs for office, they start pulling up poetry. They'll pull up the poetry of Langston Hughes or somebody else and they'll use it because it'll sound like "That's what they mean." And we go "No, no, no, you can't do that! You don't know the history of that poem. You don't know how Langston Hughes intended—so don't get it twisted!" And so, we have to be ready to jump to do that. If you want to know a treatise on language that I love, go to Toni Morrison's Nobel laureate Address where she talks about how language has been misused by dictators and twisted by all kinds of different people for their set endeavors. And I was screaming the first time I read that back in the 1980's because I was like "Yes! This is what I've been feeling my entire life! That people use words how they want but they don't go to the etymology and the root of the thing." And so, I'm always thinking about that as a poet. And you're the only person that I've ever talked with who said to me that they got the whole Head Off & Split – I'm serious! No one has ever said that. Yes, it is a fishmonger term. You walk in, you hold your fish, and they say, "Do you want me to head off and split it?" But it's also about the young poet, me, leaving home and going off into the world. And you always hit that road where you have to go left or right and you have to make those decisions. James Baldwin talks about those forty thousand million decisions that every writer has to make. So, I just said three completely different things embedded within four words and an ampersand [laughs] So I love what words do to my head. I love how they open it up. I have a poem about my Uncle Freddy who was a farmer, who would go out under the night sky and just stare at the night sky. And for the longest, the family thought he was [whispers] *the crazy one*. His generation, right? Then I come up in my generation and I watch him, and I go "Me and Uncle Freddy, we're both... quirky. We're both outside the family lines. He walks around with an almanac in his pocket. I walk around with a book of hotbed poetry in my back pocket. And I see somebody who I can relate to in my life who is not following the equation of what he should be. He's learning about who he is and who he wants to be and that's what I want!" and that's what I tried to do with words. So, I gotta go back to the hotbed that you started with. Because when I first approached my publisher and I said, "Well here's the name Lovechild's Hotbed of Occasional poetry" They said "Hotbed?! Wait a minute? What are you doing? That doesn't sound like you!" And I said "A hotbed for a gardener is a place where you start a plant. You put it in, you sun,

water, and then you stop and watch it grow” My journal book is my hotbed place. Things that I put there most often grow into a poem. A full-blooded, full-bodied poem. But of course, the second meaning was there and then suddenly they liked it because they thought people would be confused or they would be drawn to think “What is Nikki doing in her sixth decade writing about hotbeds?”

Heard: We’ll talk about this later, but I do wanna get into the evolution of Nikki Finney and the evolution of vulnerability, the evolution of bravery through you talking about sex and sexuality. So I definitely wanna get into that!

Finney: Okay!

Heard: Beforehand, I wanna hear a poem. If you will, the poem also deals with language. But language in this way of some slips in language. If you could read “Left” then I got something to say. [laughs]

Finney: You’re gonna ask me to read “Left” which is about New Orleans which is home so I’m like—I’m getting a little nervous. But I’ll do it for you. I’ll proceed with my direction. I wanna say that I was walking – and this is one of the things I love about this poem! - is how there’s many sides of one’s mind, right? And so, I was walking through the room. August is my birthday month. Katrina hit during my birthday month. And I was walking through, and I saw this black woman on top of a building with her sign. That’s the origin story for the poem. But there’s a thing in this poem that I’ve never done before that I call a running epigraph. It begins at the top and it begins to fall throughout the poem. I don’t know if you’ve ever heard this Rudyard Kipling “A Counting-Out Song” in *Land and Sea Tales for Scouts and Guides*, 1923 “Eenee Menee Mainee Mo!” That’s the first line, and the rest of his “Eenee Menee Mainee Mo” comes into the body of the poem. And I love the construction, the architecture of this poem. I had never created something like this before so it really- I haven’t read it in a long time so I’m happy to do that. Thank you, Clemonce.

The woman with cheerleading legs
has been left for dead. She hot paces a roof,
four days, three nights, her leaping fingers,
helium arms rise & fall, pulling at the week-
old baby in the bassinet, pointing to the eighty-
two-year-old grandmother, fanning & raspy
in the New Orleans Saints folding chair.

Eenee Menee Mainee Mo!

Three times a day the helicopter flies
by in a low crawl. The grandmother insists on
not being helpless, so she waves a white hand-
kerchief that she puts on and takes off her head
toward the cameraman and the pilot who
remembers well the art of his mirrored-eyed
posture in his low-flying helicopter: Bong Son,
Dong Ha, Pleiku, Chu Lai. He makes a slow
Vietcong dip & dive, a move known in Rescue
as the Observation Pass.

The roof is surrounded by broken-levee water. The people are dark but not broken. Starving, abandoned, dehydrated, brown & cumulous, but not broken. The four-hundred-year-old anniversary of observation begins, again—

Eenee Menee Mainee Mo!
Catch a—

The woman with pom-pom legs waves her uneven homemade sign:

Pleas Help Pleas

and even if the *e* has been left off the *Pleas e*

do you know simply
by looking at her
that it has been left off
because she can't spell
(and therefore is not worth saving)
or was it because the water was rising so fast
there wasn't time?

Eenee Menee Mainee Mo!
Catch a— a—

The low-flying helicopter does not know the answer. It catches all this on patriotic tape, but does not land, and does not drop dictionary, or ladder.

Regulations require an *e* be at the end of any *Pleas e* before any national response can be taken.

Therefore, it takes four days before the national council of observers will consider dropping one bottle of water, or one case of dehydrated baby formula, on the roof where the *e* has rolled off into the flood,

(but obviously not splashed

loud enough)

where four days later not the mother,
not the baby girl,
but the determined hanky waver,
whom they were both named for,
(and after) has now been covered up
with a green plastic window awning,
pushed over to the side
right where the missing *e* was last seen.

*My mother said to pick
The very best one!*

What else would you call it,
Mr. Every-Child-Left-Behind.

Anyone you know
ever left off or put on
an *e* by mistake?

Potato Po tato e

In the future observation helicopters
will leave the well-observed South and fly
in Kanye-West-Was-Finally-Right formation.
They will arrive over burning San Diego.

The fires there will be put out *so well*.
The people there will wait *in a civilized manner*.
And they will receive *foie gras* and *free massage*
for all their trouble, while there houses don't
flood, but instead burn *calmly* to the ground.

The grandmothers were right
about everything.

People who outlived bullwhips & Bull
Connor, historically afraid of water and routinely
fed to crocodiles, left in the sun on the sticky tar-
heat of roofs to roast like pigs, surrounded by
forty feet of churning water, in the summer
of 2005, while the richest country in the world
played the old observation game, studied

the situation: wondered by committee what to do;
counted, in private, by long historical division;
speculated whether or not some people are surely
born ready, accustomed to flood, famine, fear.

*My mother said to pick
The very best one
And you are not it!*

After all, it was only po' New Orleans,
old bastard city of funny spellers. Nonswimmers
with squeeze-box accordion accents. Who would
be left alive to care?

Heard: Thank you, Nikki.

Finney: You know, people don't know that you left New Orleans because of Katrina. And so it means a lot that you would choose this poem for me to read. It's personal. And I didn't know that until we first talked. And so, you know, the thing about a poet – and the thing that you have to constantly ask yourself and constantly teach yourself, Clemonce – is what do you have the right to write about? You can't go to class for that! You can't get an MFA in that! You can't! You've got to walk in the morning and ask yourself like I did can I write this poem? I'm not from New Orleans. I wasn't on top of that 40-foot building. I wasn't the woman that had the sign that had the e missing. Can I represent her correctly? Can I transform my privileged self, who was in South Carolina, dry, no water, her birthday week, can my empathy as a human being, as a poet, can I do this? Should I do it? That's what I was asking myself for weeks as I penned what I felt about watching this human moment. As I heard the wife of the president say "Oh well they're all used to trouble. They'll be fine! It's one more thing to trouble them." How do I incorporate that and not let that be where the light stays? How do I talk about that women whose name I don't know and get it right? And ask the ancestors to please guide me! Give me permission! I asked for permission, Clemonce, to write this poem. And I have asked a thousand times for permission to write a poem that I didn't experience one-on-one, but I experienced it personally. But I wasn't there. That is so important to me. And I have been told sometimes that's not for you to write. And I've backed off. Because I couldn't get the language right. I couldn't get the emotion right. And when I felt like this was done, I let it go. Maybe you've read this because you've done such great research, but a woman from the ninth ward, she came up to me after reading one day and she said, "I know you weren't there, but I was." and she said, "I've heard a lot of poems about New Orleans and about Katrina... but this one got it right." That's all I ever wanted to hear.

Heard: Thank you for reading that. I'm gonna trek through right quick. I got a little combo for you, alright? So, I know you and Nikki Giovanni are very close and that she was one of your mentors very early on. Also know Nikki Giovanni has the "Thug Life" tattoo on her forearm. From that, I'm still going [laughs] in Notorious B.I.G. the movie, Anthony Mackie (who is also from New Orleans) played Tupac. He knew that, based on what he learned about Tupac, that Tupac was seen from three different lenses. What that meant was no matter how well he does, someone's gonna say he got it wrong. But Afeni Shakur came to him after he played the role, and she told him "You got it right." And he said, "That was all I needed to hear." he said, "I don't care what anybody else say" If his own mother said he got it right?

Finney: Right!

Heard: Right. And so, a few things: one, I want to also tell you that you got it right. I believe that wholeheartedly. When I first heard you read it, I knew you got it right. Then when I read it, I knew again you got it right. We had talked about how I'm interested in appropriation within my own work and in others when reading. I mean we're taking these risks and how do we get it right? And so, sometimes we have the people who are "The Permission Givers" who will tell us beforehand you can write it or afterwards you got it right. And I'm interested in when we don't have The Permission Givers, when do you know you got it right?

Finney: I don't know until something, or someone lets me know, Clemonce. I don't know. I know that I have – there's a person in the chat that says, "Didn't you *have* to write that poem?" Yes! I did have to write that poem! But I didn't have to make it public! I didn't have to let it go! It could've stayed in my hotbed where I write everything. The hotbed is a private place typically. I talk to my students about how there's private writing and there's public writing. I'm writing this poem to have a conversation with the wider world. I don't want to just document this woman and the thing I thought about. Did they leave her on that building because she couldn't spell, and she was black? And that's how they leave black people all the time? Because they don't care about them? Just like this pandemic. We don't give black people or brown people or poor people or frontline workers the necessary medical treatment because "Oh, we 'll just get more! No problem!" We throw away human beings all the time, so I didn't wanna just document that. I wanted to work in something about America. And that whole thing about San Diego, that they had the fires. And the comments that came back were so different. They got massages while they figured out how to rebuild their houses and there were black people in New Orleans who were in the superdome for weeks... lost everything, moved everywhere. But we couldn't immediately have a response to say "Here are human beings that need us! That need the federal government!" I wanted to work on something that would stand the test of those kinds of questions and those kinds of things, and I didn't know until that woman came up to me and made me weep when I got back to my hotel room. Because then I knew. It was like, you know, the mother comes and says that. Like I bowed down to her. She didn't have to wait in line to tell me that, she could've just left. But she knew that I needed to know. I would never have slept right ever about this poem if she hadn't come up to me. And that's why I love going out in the world and talking to people who have read the work, who have something to say. Because it's never done. The poem is never finished until somebody hears it who has a reaction like that. For me. *For me!*

Heard: Thank you. Thank you so much. Yes. I have a whole bunch of stuff going on, but I want to say before we continue that y'all could play with these questions if y'all want but I got a whole bunch more so--

Finney: [laughs] Clemonce, you know it's 9 o'clock, right? You know we have now 27 minutes left? [laughs]

Heard: That's what I'm saying! And I'm telling them. Y'all don't have to ask questions because I'ma just keep going! Which is what I'm gonna do now [laughs]

Finney: [laughs] Okay!

Heard: You mentioned it earlier when talking about bravery. This is another word where you use multiple meanings and I'm wondering – we'll just jump right in. Could you read The Aureole?

Finney: The Aureole, yes.

I stop my hand midair.

If I touch her there everything about me will be true.

The New World discovered without pick or ax.

I will be what Brenda Jones was stoned for in 1969.

I saw it as a girl but didn't know I was taking in myself.

My hand remembers, treading the watery room,
just behind the rose-veiled eyes of memory.

Alone in the yard tucked beneath the hood of her car,
lucky clover all about her feet, green tea-sweet necklace
for her mud-pie crusty work boots.

She fends off their spit & words with silent two-handed
twists & turns of her socket wrench. A hurl of sticks &
stones and only me to whisper for her, from sidewalk far,

break my bones. A grown woman in grease-pocket overalls
inside her own sexy transmission despite the crowding of
hurled red hots. Beneath the hood of her candy-apple Camaro:

souped, shiny, low to the ground.

The stars over the Atlantic are dangling
salt crystals. The room at the Seashell Inn is

\$20 a night; special winter off-season rate.
No one else here but us and the night clerk,
five floors below, alone with his cherished
stack of Spiderman. My lips are red snails
in a primal search for every constellation
hiding in the sky of your body. My hand
waits for permission, for my life to agree
to be changed, forever. Can Captain Night
Clerk hear my fingers tambourining you
there on the moon? Won't he soon climb
the stairs and bam! on the hood of this car?
You are a woman with film reels for eyes.
Years of long talking have brought us to the
land of the body. Our skin is one endless
prayer bead of brown. If my hand ever lands,
I will fly past dreaming Australian Aborigines.
The old claw hammer and monkey wrench
that flew at Brenda Jones will fly across the
yard of ocean at me. A grease rag will be
thrust into my painter's pants against my
will. I will never be able to wash or peel
any of this away. Before the night is over
someone I do not know will want the keys
to my '55 silver Thunderbird. He will chase
me down the street. A gaggle of spooked
hens will fly up in my grandmother's yard,
never to lay another egg, just as I am jump-
ed, kneed, pulled finally to the high ground
of sweet clover.

Heard: Beautiful reading. Thank you! Back to love. Desire.

Finney: Thank you, yes, yes!

Heard: --But also, there's also danger again.

Finney: Yes!

Heard: I'm interested because I mentioned we were gonna talk about trajectory and really the trajectory of bravery is what I'm interested in. And so, in the book before this *The World is Round*, you have another poem titled "Sex." And again, you're doing a lot with doubling, double meaning, triple meanings. So, in "Aureole" I'm thinking of like "a circle of light, bright surrounding something" could be something holy. And I remember, in your interview you said something about the circle being the most holy or most sacred.

Finney: Oh yeah... yeah. Yeah.

Heard: Then you have a small circular area, then we have the word also being connected to aureole. So, we have all of these meanings that are happening. And then in "Sex" you have something similar. But in "Sex," we have something going on with the speaker and the speaker's mother and the speaker's mother disapproving. And thinking two women together is not something sacred – or it can never compare to the male/female binary. And so, what I'm interested in really is the type of bravery – what's the type of bravery that it took for you to first write both of these poems really? And then put them in the world knowing that there are people who love you who may disagree with the sentiments that you put in the poem?

Finney: I want to know, Clemonce, before I leave this earth who loves me and who doesn't. I want to know who will be with me and not be with me because something about me or something that I believe they just can't live with. I want to know who that tribe of people – who they are!! I wanna talk with them. I wanna be fully vulnerable to them. I think I have one time around this earth, on this ground. It might surprise me, I'll come back as an eagle. I'll come back as an elephant (since we're killing all the elephants) I will come back. But this is what I know. As I have grown and matured as a poet and filled out my heart, you don't fill out your heart at birth. You fill out your heart as you try things, as you mess up, as you figure out the language in the mirror when you're 16. And when the road splits and you leave your womb nest, and you have to make decisions about not *what* you will be but *who* you will be. So I am not the kind of person who believes that when you are growing and when you are understanding all of the things that you are, including sexuality -- I was not allowed as a Black southern girl to have any other thing in my head in South Carolina except some sort of heteronormative trajectory. In the church. Every Sunday. Being queer or gay was not allowed, no conversation. I'll never forget my family. My mother is this "Don't play!" She does not use flower-y language, she cuts to the quick, she does not suffer fools lightly. I'm her only daughter, she raised me hard... *hard!* She wanted me to be like her. She wanted me to wear frilly things. She wanted me to *be* her. Little her. A little her. That's not unusual. But when I started coming into my own at 9 and 15 and 16. And then when I started coming into my sexuality later, she and I just locked horns, right? So this poem called "Sex" is what she gave me. She was like "You're going to hell. You don't know anything about sex anyway. And what you are doing is some other version--" and she just really [snaps fingers] peeled that off to me. And I stood there in honor of being her daughter and listened and took it in. And to this day, my mother will not talk to me

about this poem. She will not address it. She calls it the poem where she says I hurt her feelings. But it wasn't- there's no lie here, she said all these things. And I did put them out into the world. And I did have to go back and ask myself for *permission*. Can I do this? Because I thought another human being needed to hear this. I'm a poet. So, she now understands that this is what I do. I love her. We are closer than ever; we are much closer now than we were when I was growing up in her house. Because she sees me in a fullness that she wouldn't- she was trying to shape me! You know, when you're trying to shape somebody, you don't want them to be different from what you want them to be. But now that she sees that all of who I am is *Lovechild*, she has calmed down a little bit about her expectations—a little bit, not that much [laughs]--about her expectations. My students often ask me "Well, I can't put that in a book. I can never write about that." But I say, you're thinking about the subject, that's not what I'm thinking about. It's about what public conversation do you want to have about that subject. That's what's important to me. I am much more interested in that. My mother knows I love her, I'm not trying to embarrass her. I am trying to cite a moment between us that really made us who we are today.

Heard: Mm.... yes. Thank you for that beautiful answer. Let me make sure... [checks Zoom chat box] okay I don't see any questions. But y'all know I'm just gonna keep going.

Finney: [laughs] Nobody has any questions out there? They're not asking anything?! Hello, audience!

Heard: We're gonna take care of her until y'all do! [laughs]

Finney: [laughs]

Heard: So, we're gonna jump around a little bit. I was gonna just keep trucking through, but I wanna stay because there is what you just said about your mother feeling like okay, that's the one she won't talk to you about. But there's also the other side of that. Like that doesn't mean you don't still adore your mother. You know what I'm saying? There is the other side of that. And I wanna get at that, I wanna start getting at mortality. Because there's a difference between *On Wings Made of Gauze* your first collection and the way you speak on mortality versus *Lovechild's Hotbed of Occasional Poetry* where you're implicating yourself more. And so, could you read for us out of *On Wings Made of Gauze*, could you read *Blinded*?

Finney: First of all, nobody ever asks me to read—well, what did you say Clemonce? You said "Finding a copy of this book is like finding--" What? What did you say?! Come on, you gotta say it!

Heard: Like finding the first Beatles album.

Finney: [laughs]

Heard: I was like "Why is this book \$100?!" It's a rare book! And I promise, I contacted like five libraries, and they were just not getting to me. They were like "No, you can't come here." "We're only open to the school" It was UT Austin. And I was like "I need this book" I went through a lot of channels. I had to fight some [laughs] some kangaroos. Like I had to get into it to get this book. And I'm so glad I did in time. In the nick of time. [laughs]

Finney: [laughs] It's embarrassing to see a 26-year-old poet on the back of the cover--

Heard: Gorgeous!

Finney: --of this book. And you will hear a 26-year-old poet, I think. I've been writing for four decades. And I've hopefully been growing and not writing the same poems. We talked about this last night in that beautiful workshop about the visual. And I've been that visually inclined poet for a really, really long time. Nobody asks me to read out of this! Maybe it's because they can't find it just like that Beatles album you talked about [laughs] But I'm gonna read this poem for you [laughs] for everybody. And this is about my mom. And this is about how my mom would get dressed to go out with my dad for a little Friday night dinner or something. And I would go into her bedroom, and I would watch her get dressed and um... This is called *Blinded*.

Blinded by Nikki Finney (not the accurate line breaks)

I remember walking through the room after Mama had finished dressing

Sitting by the window, sifting through the smells that had imposed themselves upon the air

So many scents

I closed my eyes and wished her there with me chocolate from the cookie she baked while we slept

Sweetness from empty bottles of Chanel

Gasoline and grass smells from the yard that captured her free moments

Long before the chocolate melted, and the sweetness went

I left myself from the sill

Drag my thoughts across the room

And quickly, quietly, close the door so as not to lose her.

I'm a very young poet in this poem, but my sense – my father only bought one perfume for my mom for like 40 years, it was Chanel No. 5 [laughs] So that was where this Chanel came in and, you know, that was his way of saying "I know what you like! I'ma bring it home!" So...

Heard: So, the sensory details of this poem, ending with the smell is what got me. And I think it took me back to a book that I read a while back called *The Secret of the Secret Place*. And this was back when I was uber-Christian. And so, it said "close the door and God is there-" pretty much. You closed the door and that ended reminded me, brought me to that. But again, that thing about mortality, there was something you said in an interview "I know I will die with words on my lips. I know that I will never finish my responsibilities to this vocation." So, I'm interested in the urgency that I feel in *Lovechild's Hotbed of Occasional Poetry* that is different from your other work, and they're just happening! And not just because – like I think about how there are shorter poems, prose poems, there are shorter works in that book but there's also a very long, sprawling poem. The long poem and the seriousness that a long poem demands. You know, if you're writing for that long it's like you need to pay attention, this is important!

Finney: Right!

Heard: But there is something about the urgency in these last poems that are really striking to me. So I'm interested in... what kind of urgency and discovery after 40 years of writing are you working towards? And what does your own mortality add to that urgency?

Finney: I feel like I have always had a kind of urgency, Clemonce. I feel like um... But not an urgency... I'm more turtle than rabbit. So, you said the 8-10 years' time span when I publish a book, it's so true. I'm pondering. I'm walking. I'm a country girl. I grew up on my grandparents' farm, so I love the wondering through an idea. The comeback around to it. I don't feel an urgency to write fast, I feel an urgency to get it right and to say the thing in the way that it needs to be said. The world will tell you you need to publish NOW! You gotta get your work out or the rain is gonna leave the station and all this kind of stuff. And I have so many young poets who want to publish before they understand what the poem is about! And I am here to tell you to slow down. Figure out where your center is, your center in that poem, before you put it out in the world because you can't get it back. Once the internet publishes it and you say "Ugh! I wish I would've held onto that for a little while longer!" But I don't care about the train leaving the station. It's what you care about in terms of this writing life. I care about watching the surprise happen in my hands when I put together that poem called "Left." I care that I've gone from my mother in that poem called "Sex" to that poem I just read "The Aureole" and what happened to me as a poet and a woman to take me from that poem to that poem. That's what I care about. So the urgency I hope you feel in *Lovechild's* has to do with someone who has been at this for a while. And someone who has figured out some things about herself while she has been writing here at this desk, in the middle of the night, or early in the morning – which is what I prefer – and it's not, you know, balloons haven't gone off, fireworks haven't gone off, but I have come to understand myself a little bit better. That is what I care most about because if I figure myself out a little bit better, if I dig a little deeper into the etymology of some new words, then I'm gonna continue to create and I'm gonna deepen the well that I have been creating in which you have so beautifully helped me illustrate tonight. But I'm not a ballerina. If my knees go out? The pencil lead [laughs] is still there, right? So I take my walks, I drink my carrot juice, I eat my tofu, I do my yoga. Because you need this body to help create the next poem. We don't say that enough! You need somebody to love you, to see you, to be your friend, to help you get the next poem out. If you have people in your life that don't think this matters or this matters or this what we're talking about matters then they're not gonna say "Sweetheart, maybe we shouldn't go on that trip. Maybe you need to stay here and work on something. Do you need to stay here and work on something?" Why don't we talk about that as poets, as writers? The people we share our house with? Who don't think that our vocation matters? And then we will start choosing people who see us whole. Not fragmented. Not like we're doing a little hobby thing. Not like "Would you hurry up with that poem?"

Heard: [laughs] Right!

Finney: Why don't we talk about how we need lovers, and we need friends, and we need a small circle of people to cheerlead us till the end of that poem? I talk about that. I talk about crisp verbs, figurative language, enjambment, end words, and I also talk about – with my students – who's loving you? And who's making you hurry? I don't want to know all the details. I just want them to know they need to think about this. [Female poet]'s last book was burned in an oil can in Florida when she died. They just went in her office, and they would take the folder and say, "Well this is just trash, this is nothing." And they burned up her work because there was nobody right there to say "Don't do that! That right there is the next book. Hold up! No, don't touch that!" And we're interior people, we're quiet. We don't tell

everybody that this is the next book, or this is something I'm working on. We have a shyness about it. And I'm saying stop, don't do that! Tell somebody how much this means to you. And see if you can live up to those words that you said to that person that you say you love. I had to learn that, Clemonce. There were no poets in my neighborhood. There were no published writers. There were electricians, and teachers, and nurses, and mothers, and fathers. And I had to say, "How do I do this?" I read interviews with writers. I would go to readings and put my little hand up and ask a really important question. You know, I've cobbled together this life that I'm in, that I love! That I feel lucky to be in. I feel fortunate to be able to be in conversation with you. I feel fortunate that Oklahoma City University wanted me to come in this 22nd year of cheerleading the written word into the universe. I never take it for granted... ever. I wanna do right by it. I wanna do right by words. Because I feel like so many people feel like "Oh the camera's always on the politician, or the fool, or this thing over here," when the artist, back to Baldwin, the artist is the only one who can tell us what it's like to be human. That is why it's my job to talk about the girl from [Hurricane Katrina]. That is why it's my job to talk about a mother and daughter talking to figure out how they love each other and what's gonna fall apart and what's gonna remain. Because we are now in a country and a moment where we are once again chiseling away at all the legislation going out no for trans youth who want and need the help of states and doctors and institutions. And now there's all this- it's by design to cut out some people in the community that once again can be "let go, we don't need them." That's the sound that I'm hearing. And when I heard the governor of Arkansas yesterday or the day before say "If you do this, you are doing something very destructive to a group of young people who need us to see them." And he lost, and the legislator did what they wanted to do and it's a very violent, very destructive thing. And we need to be more vocal as poets, as writers, as empathetic people. You don't have to *be* me but I wanna be in conversation with you. Because right now there's so many things like Internet, Facebook, Twitter, that divides us into "Who likes me? Do you like me? Do you like me?" I don't want you to like. I don't want you to like me. I want to be in conversation with you. That's what makes us human! Language! And if we let language – the real definition of language, the etymology, the root of language – if we let that go, if we let people pirate it and make money off of it, and turn us against each other, then we have lost the thing that makes us human. I don't wanna lose it, I'ma fight for it. It's gonna be on my lips until I go outta here!

Heard: My interview right there [laughs] my interview right there next to it!

Finney: [laughs]

Heard: Alright so, I know we're running out of time – or we ran out of time.

Finney: Until we meet again! You watch! You watch, Clemonce, we're gonna do this again.

Heard: Right! I do want to end this out with a poem if that's alright with Tracy. I just wanna say I appreciate the audience again.

Finney: [laughs] Such good listeners! Look, you didn't even intrude! [laughs] Thank you so much for listening! I hear you, and there was somebody else who was listening and said "I didn't wanna intrude" because they were listening to what we were saying, Clemonce. You know, as poets in this world, we need you listening. We need you listening, and we need you taking what you've heard and doing something with it. Because as my grandmother used to say "If you do what you've always done, you're gonna get what you've always got. Do something different!" She would say. And I believe that, and I live by that. So, in our own little cubby worlds we can do something different than we did yesterday.

Heard: So, can you end this off with a hotbed?

Finney: Okay!

Heard: Okay so, I think since Lovechild was given by your father, I think we should end on a hotbed where your father appears...

Finney: [gasps] Oh! Yes!

Heard: ...so could you finish us off with Hotbed 18?

Finney: Okay. Thank you all for listening so carefully and I wish I could see your voices, each of your faces. But I will take you out into this night sky after this and give thanks for life, and for courage, and for having people to see you whole. And so, I thank you abundantly. Hotbed 18... The Newest Development. Let me just say that the backstory is this book was born when I came home in 2013 to take care of my father who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. My father and I were joined on the hip, incredibly close, and I was not gonna let anybody take care of him without my being there and helping to take care of him. So, this is one of the moments that I experienced with him. The Newest Development...

The newest development: Papa's changing mind has reached a new clip. One day it arrives in the heart of the forest in all its awkward grandeur, like a great prehistoric bird. The next day it's gone, bereft, lost again in a jungle of rainforest clouds. It frustrates him so deeply. It's all there in his face. I think about the way my mind ticks and tocks and I try to imagine what he must be feeling as everything he once knew steps farther and farther away. Today he is even having trouble remembering who is male and female. His pronouns are positively fluid. My students would be impressed with his hipness. He speaks his new mind in new ways that are no longer bound to his old habits, religious beliefs, or professional training. Today he leaned over and asked me, *Is your wife coming over?* I smiled at the surprise and directness of his question, raised his hands up to my lips and placed a kiss there for a long, long while. What a sound the word "wife" makes in my ear, riding the carpet of his voice. It will be two years before I meet my wife, whose arrival Papa has now both revealed and blessed.

Thank you all for listening and for sending us such *good juice through the airwaves!* [laughs] Thank you, Tracy, for being there for us and helping us figure this out. And I'm gonna come to Oklahoma City, I'm saying this out loud! And I'm gonna be in person one day, we'll figure this out!

Dr. Tracy Floreani: I hope so! I hope so, and we'll show you a good time! [laughs]

Finney: Oh, I bet!

[END]