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THE OPERATING SYSTEM PRINT//DOCUMENT

SAY/MIRROR

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say / mirror

POEMS AND HISTORIES

JP HOWARD



Ruth King winning a costume prize at the Urban League Ball at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem, New York, February 1949. Photographer: Yale Joel

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Ruth King (3rd from right) with Cab Calloway,
Sugar Ray Robinson and others.
Date and photographer unknown.

Remembering: A Preface

Growing up in Sugar Hill, Harlem on 149th Street right off of Convent Avenue was like having my very own history book as my backyard. I don't think there was ever a time when my Mama wasn't telling me/teaching me about the Harlem Renaissance and all the great folks that had contributed so much culture to our beloved neighborhood before I was even born. And then there was Mama the Diva, the one and only Ruth King. There were always pictures of my Mama in our cramped apartment. There were hundreds of pictures of Mama, who had been a well known runway model in Harlem, before she had me.

The pictures were from the 1940's and 1950's and they were glamorous. I realized at a very young age there was never a camera that didn't love Mama and Mama never met a camera she didn't love. Some of my poems explore my own love/hate relationship with the camera and Mama.

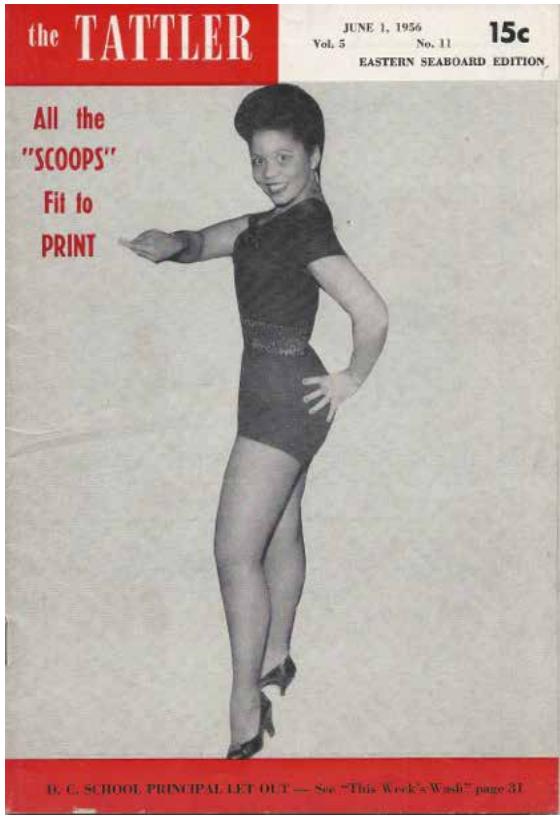
Mama spoke honestly about what it meant for her to be a model in Harlem and often talked about how she had "broken the barrier." She explained that she was one of the first brown skinned models who did not have straight or white folks hair and who gained notoriety as an African American model. I learned that before she came along most Black models were very light skinned, some almost to the point that they could pass as white women and most of them had long straight hair. She explained to me that this was the beauty ideal that was strutting on runways, so when she came along with her tantalizing brown skin, her Black folks hair, that was not straight and did not hang down her back, there was agitation in the modeling community. What was clear to me was that Mama was a trailblazer who did not step off the runway because she did not look like the African American models that had long dominated the runways before her arrival. She was gorgeous, other folks knew she was stunning and her Leo ego was strong enough to sustain herself and ignore folks who didn't appreciate all her fabulousness. There were pictures of her on magazine covers that showed she was Harlem's most

eligible bachelorette and that she traveled in circles with famous Black politicians and other celebrities, so it was clear she had successfully “broken the barrier” and was paving the way for African American models of all gorgeous shades to also strut their stuff on the runway. Years later when she was interviewed for the coffee table book *Skin Deep: Inside the World of Black Fashion Models* by Barbara Summers (Harpers Collins, 1998) this was confirmation that she had indeed broken the barrier and was recognized as a Black fashion model by a larger audience. Here is a link to the picture included in the book, now on vintage black glamour: <http://vintageblackglamour.tumblr.com/post/11403462429ruth-king-a-popular-1950s-model-on-the-runway>

This book is really an extension of me, as daughter, as mother, as woman finding her voice. *SAY/MIRROR* – the title reflects a dual reality, one is the narrator looking in the Mirror

\\ \ 8 | REMEMBERING : A PREFACE \\ \ \





the **TATTLER**

JUNE 1, 1956 **15c**
 Vol. 5 No. 11
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All the
"SCOOPS"
 Fit to
 PRINT



H. C. SCHOOL PRINCIPAL LET OUT — See "This Week's Wash" page 31

THE TATTLER
 Vol. 5 No. 11

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THE GOOD OLE SUMMERTIME

Yep, its here—the good ole summertime and we hope the living is easy. Fish ought to be jumpin' for the fishermen and Old Sol will be working overtime browning (no pun intended) the beach folks. Foolish people who can't swim will be taking chances with boats in order to keep a later date with a grappling hook. Heavy drinkers will be at the bathing places miking their scotch and bourbon with too much water. Upstaters will be heading for Maine, so will the downstaters. Vacationers will be bluffing at Oak Bluffs, playing harder at Sag Harbor and leaving with a smile for Idlewild. . . . Down Atlantic City way the homies will be sharpening their salesmanship to sell everything that's for sale and voracious chorus girls will be hooking on their horse tails. Yep again, it's a good season and Bermuda shorts will be seen everywhere but in Bermuda. Indoor sport switches to an air conditioned kick and a hot night, two lovers and a blanket in the park become a way of life. A lotta folks will suddenly realize that it ain't what you've earned, it's what you've saved ere you start on the annual vacation trek. Banner Lodge in Connecticut is the newest vacation spot for club members and others and it just suddenly dawned on this TATTLER scribe that you're only young once . . . and looking back over the way we've lived it ONCE IS ENOUGH! . . . Continue reading the TATTLER and then pass it on to your friends because it is rich legacy done up in sensational type.

ON THE COVER: Lovable, excitable, scintillating Ruth King of New York and the U. S. gives Tattler readers a rare treat as she points a finger to our trade mark with a hand resting on hers. The shapely miss is one of the East Coast's most talked about models and is right in there picking for the title of "Miss East Coast" in the Tattler's newest contest. Miss King's most recent appearance was in a Million Dollar Fashion Show at Abyssinia Baptist Church. She numbers among her "bosom" friends top most political, sports and social figures.

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Both pages, L-R, all Ruth King: SEPIA RECORD Cover, date unknown; Calendar Girl. 1948; The TATTLER Cover 1956

and using her voice to explore both history and present day, often through the lens of the mother/daughter relationship. There is also the Mirror as symbolic, since my mother was a Model there were always Mirror(s) which filled our home and the title plays with the idea of self as mirror/as reflection as well as Mama who sometimes saw her child as object/as doll/ as her own mirror/something/someone she had created and could show and tell. There is also my mother who by breaking the "color" barrier, had something to say to the Mirror. While my mother was darker complexioned than Black models before her and her presence on the runways was ground breaking because of that, there was a flip side that played into our relationship.

MEMBERING: A PREFACE | 9 |

SAY / MIRROR

PRAISE POEM FOR TODAY

Praise the first poet you ever read.
Praise Mama who asked you to recite her favorite Margaret Walker poem,
to church ladies at Abyssinian every Sunday,
when you were in elementary school.
Praise sound of your voice then and now.
Praise your inner child and her will to live.
Praise Mama's cycle of sadness.
Praise all those tears you shed.
Praise that couple who cried when they heard your Trayvon poems.
Praise black boys you wrap in stanzas.
Praise sons who live on through candlelight vigils.
Praise your shattered past and your unknown future.
Praise sweet sound of words on your tongue before they stain the sheet.
Praise poets who split themselves open to save lives.
Praise all the poems you don't want to write, but will, to save your own life.
Praise secrets that burn the page.
Praise ex-lovers who will never die as long as you write.
Praise beauty of a new poem pushing her way to surface.
Praise her shape on the page as she unfolds.



WHEN YOUR MAMA IS A LEO DIVA

1. You can't help but be a Diva yourself.
2. Sometimes she forget she a Mama; she never forget she a Diva.
3. She will tell you you're the most beautiful person in the room; you will believe her.
4. At 90 she still fine and wears ruby red lipstick when she enters a room.
5. She will never forgive you for cutting your long hair nearly 25 years ago.
6. She will tell you how gorgeous every new haircut looks on you, followed by "despite the fact that you cut your beautiful, long hair off decades ago."
7. She will teach you the art of self-love and self-care, before you go to middle school.
8. She will not learn how to cook until you leave for college and have no regrets about serving you shake and bake all those years.
9. She will be your biggest advocate and sometimes your greatest obstacle.
10. She will love you, even you when you have stopped loving yourself.

LITTLE GIRL VOICE

this poem so quiet,
she sound like my ten-year old self,
tip-toeing around her own thoughts

when no one is listening,
she reads other peoples poems.
like the ones she found at the library

she whispers curse words under breath,
so soft even Mama can't hear

so soft even Mama can't hear
her words. her words so soft they disappear.
she swallow them whole

Child eat those words,
let them fill your belly.

PRAISE POEM FOR THE JOURNEY

Praise the therapist who told me twenty years ago:
You are not your mother, you do not have to be your mother.
Praise the years I spent wanting children,
yet afraid to repeat her mistakes.
Praise my child-self who took care of mama every time she passed out.
Praise my adult-self who feared the burden of “caretaker” yet again.
Praise my intellect for recognizing my fears and facing them head on.
Praise my therapist who let me talk out my fears all those years,
long before I wrapped myself in this mama cloak that fits so well.
Praise my mama who did the best with the skills she had.
Praise the Divas who are sometimes forced to be mamas
and the mamas who give birth to Divas.
Praise them all. Shower them with love and affection.
Praise my sons. Praise the first male children born
after three successive generations of women.
Praise their lean bodies growing up, up each day towards manhood.
Praise the spark in their eyes. Praise their keen intellect and
their giggles that fill my heart. Praise this calm my child-self never knew.
Praise the mothers who love from up close and from afar.
Praise our children who we tuck in each night and
those whose names we wrap in prayer,
no matter where they lay their heads down to sleep.

PRAISE POEM FOR OUR MAMAS

Praise our Mamas
Praise the ones who loved us fiercely
Praise the ones who left us behind
Praise their bosoms
Praise tears we shed all those years
Praise softness of skin against skin
Praise those who listened again and again
Praise poems we birthed
Praise our ability to forgive
Praise the poet's tears
Praise that sweet child that remains
Praise her soft voice
Praise Mama humming your favorite lullaby
Praise Mamas who shut the door
Praise Mamas whose doors were wide open

Praise “Come here sit on Mama lap baby” Mamas
Praise Mamas who never learned to look beyond their reflection
 Praise Mama’s reflection
 Praise Mama in your mirror
 Praise your reflection in your mirror
 Praise love’s complicated contours
 Praise her edges, sharp then soft
 Praise Mamas who bend and open to hugs
 Praise Mamas who never learned to hug
 Praise a laying on of hands, soft like Mama’s
Praise your best friend, who nurtures like a Mama
 Praise the memory of Mama
 Praise that soft spot in your heart
 Call her Mama.

FOR THE POET, PAT PARKER
ON SAVING LIVES

\\ | FOR THE POET, PAT PARKER, ON SAVING LIVES | //

For the poet, Pat Parker, on saving lives

Some poets make magic.
They write real shyt,
save li(f)e of a teen
who buries herself under covers.

Their poems sp(l)it in your mouth.
If you ain't careful,
they will tongue kiss you
while you sleep.

LOVE NOTE TO A POEM

dear poem,

thank you for finding me.
i was getting tired of all those secrets, now you let them fly off the page.
they beautiful when they transform and flutter.
poem, sometimes you sound like my 6th grade teacher, mr. jamison,
right after i told him my secret, that papa had died the night before,
that mama drank her smirnoff and was too drunk to know any better,
so she sent me to school anyhow.
poem, sometimes you sound like him, your voice deep yet soft,
whispering, you so strong baby girl, you stronger than even you know.
poem sometimes you a wreath of sunflowers.

love,
me

WHAT TO SAY TO A FRIEND WHO WANTS TO GIVE UP

Say I love you, even when you can't love yourself.
Say please, please not today,
Say too much life unlived.
Say mirror, say beautiful,
Say this arm, take this arm,
Say grab, say hold, say let tears fall,
Say tears heal, Say forgive your mama,
Say she did the best she could.
Say tomorrow, say sleep,
Say split second, split the seconds,
Say let the seconds turn into days,
Say today, Say tomorrow, Say sun.
Say warm, Say skin,
Say warm skin, say sunlight,
Say new day, Say breath,
Say inhale, Say exhale.
Say not today baby girl,
Say so much life to live,
Say love, Say I love you.
Say hold on, hold on to love.

notes and commentary



clockwise from top left:
Ruth King with Eartha Kitt,
Ruth King with Richard Nixon,
JP Howard in her childhood home

POET J.P. HOWARD
and EDITOR
LYNNE DESILVA-JOHNSON
IN CONVERSATION

Who are you?

I am a mom, a lover, a poet, a curator and nurturer of all things poetry.

Why are you a poet?

I am a poet because poetry helps me stay connected to the world and express myself.
It's the lens through which I view the world.

When did you decide you were a poet?

I was in elementary school definitely. Maybe 8 or 9 years old.

What's a "poet"?

A poet is someone who has the courage to speak the truth as they see or experience it.

What is the role of the poet today?

The poet has many roles, currently I see the role of the poet as educator,
as political activist, as lover of words and ideas.

*What do you see as your cultural and social role?
(in the poetry community and beyond)*

My cultural role and social role is as community organizer/curator/nurturer. I think I am a natural leader, perhaps true to my Leo sign. I am most comfortable as collaborator and I work well with others to effectuate change. It's a strength I've become more aware of and truly embraced these past, nearly three years, curating the Salon and working with a larger community.

JP Howard aka Juliet P. Howard

JULIET P HOWARD aka JP HOWARD is a Cave Canem graduate fellow. She is the author of SAY/MIRROR, a debut poetry collection published by The Operating System (2015) and a chaplet “bury your love poems here” (Belladonna Collaborative, 2015). She curates Women Writers in Bloom Poetry Salon (WWBPS), a forum offering women writers a venue to come together in a positive and supportive space in NY. The Salon celebrates a diverse array of women poets and includes a large LGBTQ POC membership. JP is an alum of the VONA/Voices Writers Workshop, as well as a Lambda Literary Foundation Emerging LGBT Voices Fellow. She was a finalist in The Feminist Wire’s 2014 1st Poetry Contest. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in The Feminist Wire, pluck! The Journal of Afrilachian Arts & Culture, Poets, Split this Rock, Nepantla: A Journal for Queer Poets of Color, Muzzle Magazine, Adrienne: A Poetry Journal of Queer Women, The Best American Poetry Blog, MiPOesias, The Mom Egg, Talking Writing and Connotation Press, among others. JP holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the City College of New York and a BA from Barnard College.*



photo : Nivea Castro

DOC U MENT

/däkŷəmənt/

First meant “instruction” or “evidence,” whether written or not.

noun - a piece of written, printed, or electronic matter that provides information or evidence or that serves as an official record
verb - record (something) in written, photographic, or other form
synonyms - paper - deed - record - writing - act - instrument

[*Middle English, precept, from Old French, from Latin documentum, example, proof, from docere, to teach; see dek- in Indo-European roots.*]

Who is responsible for the manufacture of value?

Based on what supercilious ontology have we landed in a space where we vie against other creative people in vain pursuit of the fleeting credibilities of the scarcity economy, rather than freely collaborating and sharing openly with each other in ecstatic celebration of MAKING?

While we understand and acknowledge the economic pressures and fear-mongering that threatens to dominate and crush the creative impulse, we also believe that now more than ever we have the tools to relinquish agency via cooperative means, fueled by the fires of the Open Source Movement.

Looking out across the invisible vistas of that rhizomatic parallel country
we can begin to see our community beyond constraints,
in the place where intention meets resilient, proactive, collaborative organization.

Here is a document born of that belief, sown purely of imagination and will.
When we document we assert. We print to make real, to reify our being there.

When we do so with mindful intention to address our process,
to open our work to others, to create beauty in words in space, to respect and acknowledge the strength of the page we now hold physical, a thing in our hand...
we remind ourselves that, like Dorothy: *we had the power all along, my dears.*

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