

Praise for *Yabo*

In lean, unjustified lines, this skillful scholar of blackness gives us her latest rebel text, *Yabo*. Novel or epic poem? ...Whether Alexis De Veaux is writing fiction, poetry, theater, biography or letters, she does so with a mythic grasp of her subject matter: language, rhythm, history, pussy, gender prisms and prisons, circular time and time travel, naming and simultaneity of locations. Sex is stated, understated; and the intellectual hunger won't be separated from the erotic. Subtext is everything.

See *Yabo* ... like a Mingus composition: Pentecostal, blues-inflected, full of wit and that deep literacy of the black diaspora. The present, the past, the uncertain future collapse upon themselves in this narrative of place/s. Our dead move with us: behind us, above us, confronting us—in Manhattan; Asheville, N.C.; Buffalo, N.Y.; Jamaica; the hold of a funky slave ship; crossing and bending lines between genders, sexualities, longing and geographies. Time is a river endlessly coursing, shallow in many places, deep for long miles, and, finally, deadly as the hurricane that engulfs and destroys the slave vessel, “Henrietta Marie.” *Yabo* calls our ghosts back and holds us accountable for memory.

—Cheryl Clarke, author, *Living as a Lesbian* and *The Days of Good Looks*

Alexis De Veaux laces together the past and the present with poetic elegance in an intricate and delicate pattern of call and response. Her characters are both mythic and guttural and, like her narrative, glide across social, physical and temporal boundaries, drawing the reader into an emotional vortex. Echoing the work of Jean Toomer and Toni Morrison, *Yabo* speaks in a powerful and insistent cadence about things we may have forgotten: death, desire, magic and the drum beat of resilience.

—Jewelle Gomez, author, *The Gilda Stories*

“Living between possibilities” is a key theme of and narrative hinge in Alexis De Veaux’s ever-surprising innovative hybrid novella *Yabo*. As much a work of spiritual excavation and conjuration as fiction, this text opens doors to worlds we might otherwise pass by, showing in the process what it truly means to create. A poetic, enthralling, unforgettable text.

— John Keene, author, *Annotations*

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Also by Alexis De Veaux:

The Last Papar: A Memoir 2004-2006

Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde

Spirit Talk

An Enchanted Hair Tale

Blue Heat: A Portfolio of Poems and Drawings

Don't Explain: A Song of Billie Holiday

Spirits in the Street

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ALEXIS DE VEAUX



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Yabo

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For Tanya Linda De Veaux

“... and it was is if I'd entered the mother universe, a universe that I had never known existed...”

—Darlene Clark Hine

Every story is an onion. An interval between itself and the one inside. And each is an event, in relation to other events.

—A. D.

PRELUDE:

There was a time in which we knew these things.
When we did not doubt. Ask your grandparents.
Or, if you are among the truly fortunate, ask your great-grandparents. They know.
They know about the technologies of knowledge.
Not these technologies.
These that make of our prayers, lies; not these
that make us live without grace.
A child can also know the living grace. A certain child.
That child may be here only briefly, to us. But in that time with
us, that child is not alive only here.
The child, a certain child, only visits our here
because the child lives in time's grace, visits here but
knows other heres.

O yes, there are other heres. Simultaneous to this one.
Echoes.
Or did you think the story you were told, the story you grew up
believing, repeating, about the past, present, and the future—
and the commas you see here separating those stories—was all
there is?

We used to know this. When we had antennae. When we were
synesthetic.

But now we are evolving, adapting, shedding that which we no
longer use. Perhaps you are thinking of your appendix. But can
you think of the spot where you once grew antennae? It is still
there. Because the body never forgets; which is why you are not
necessary in its remembering.

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The ones between here and another here know.
They know the stories.

This is the story my grandfather told.

Membrane:

This is not the story my grandfather told.

Memoir: New Orleans it was called, that world.

We were left there to work and work and work, and be broken.
Until came a day, and they said go, you free. It is said some could
fly, those orisha. There was a boat and we sail for our world.
We did not fear water daughter. A canoe is not ship. And the
water was, the water was.

Returning, some saw Yemaja she cry waves. And there came a
great storm. A great storm.

Some of our people fell inside Yemaja. Some swam because
Yemaja let them ride she. To the nearest shore.

That is why you must remember

you is from Bahama

you is from Ayiti

you is from Cooba

you is from Barbaduhs

you is from there here.

He did not say this is true. He said, remember this daughter.

I met a man whose Scottish people settled in the South.

Low country.

I told him the story my grandfather told.

O yes, he said, I heard about that story. Years ago. I read it in a
book.

A Creole priest was involved.

There was more than one boat.

GARDENIAS:

Hand me the spade, Ezra said.

She was on her knees, at the side of the porch, wrestling with a stubborn patch of weed.

The granddaughter stood up, wiping a cake of soil from her hands. It was only morning and it was already too hot out for the girl. Too soon after grits and biscuits and salmon croquettes to be put to work. And too many insects buzzing about. Although she regularly came to visit her grandmother in summer, Zen wasn't fond of Shadow, North Carolina, a little town she could never find on any map. She fished the small tool out of the wheelbarrow and knelt back down beside Ezra.

Here you go, Grams, Zen said.

Thank you, baby girl.

Ezra thrust the spade into the dirt. She worked it deep beneath the weed, churning up its soil, tearing its roots from the earth. Watching, Zen wiped her own brow, relieved the willful thing had been dug up.

Now, Ezra said triumphant, we can finish putting these asters in. She pictured the showy, violet blue flower heads in the shape of stars, blossoming soon.

Ezra slid the tray of new perennials between herself and Zen. She picked one up and scored its dense roots with a box knife. Zen dug a hole in the dirt with her hands. When it was deep enough, Ezra handed Zen the little plant.

Spread the roots out, she instructed. She watched the girl do as she'd seen her grandmother do earlier, nestling the plant carefully, firmly, in the soil. Ezra smiled to herself. The girl didn't seem to mind getting this dirt under her fingernails. Her mother, Lillian, had left it behind for what she thought was better up north.

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Some people could and had done that.
Some, like her, couldn't. They were tethered to memory.

After they planted the asters, they put in a new bed of daisies, cut some black-eyed susans for the dining room table, and pruned Ezra's gardenias, talking as they worked.

Then Ezra insisted they take a break. They walked through the field behind the house and sat down by the creek. Ezra shook off her sandals and cooled her feet in the brooking water.

Did I ever tell you why I became a teacher? she said.

Because you like teaching. Zen took off her sneakers and socks.

I do like teaching, Ezra said. But the reason I became a teacher is because once upon a time it was a crime for us to read and write.

Zen dipped her toes in the creek. The water was cold, murky. A crime?

Yes baby girl. Down here, some got caught trying to learn how and they were killed for that.

Fortunately, that time is over now. Then, after a moment, Ezra said, you like to read don't you?

Zen thought of her shelves of books at home. How time slipped away when she was reading. The book reports she loved to write. Her library card. Yes Grams, she said.

Ezra sized the teenager up. Something tells me you like books more than you like boys.

It's not a crime, is it? Zen met her grandmother's gaze.

Ezra chuckled, put her arm around the girl. Get as much education as you can, she said, then get some more.

Zen leaned into her grandmother's embrace, pleased that her grandmother was tickled with her.

Later, after dinner, Ezra sat on the couch between her new husband, Wayland, and Zen. The television was on but the sound was low. Zen snoozed at her grandmother's side. The flowery scent of Ezra was comforting. Wayland whispered in

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Ezrah's ear, and she stifled a giggle. After a while Zen gave into deep sleep.

The next morning Ezrah awoke earlier than usual. She dressed and went into the kitchen. She fried up a heap of chicken, made a pan full of biscuits, and two sweet potato pies. The evening train wouldn't get into New York City until the next day. She and Zen had to have enough food for the trip.



That particular afternoon, they were lying on their backs, at the lip of Singers' Creek.

A shallow cliff of rock stretched beneath them. A green bullfrog lazed at the bank. The grass was warm and damp.

Jules shaded eyes with one hand, turned over facing Zen. Could see Zen's grandmother through the tall grass, at the side of her porch, talking to her gardenias as she watered them. Jules slid closer.

Felt a little clumsy. Traced with one finger the map of fresh knots parted by neat squares dotting Zen's head.

Jules whispered, why you never let me kiss your pussy?

Zen gave Jules a salty look, then rolled onto her stomach. She caught a whiff of sweet flower between herself and Jules. The field separating the creek and her grandmother's house seemed smaller that summer. There were no globes of watermelon sprouting behind the house. Ever since she was a little girl, watermelons and bullfrogs and the creek.

Why you so nasty? This last word Zen drew out so that it sounded exactly like itself.

She eyed the prickly fuzz covering Jules's head like stubble, the glint of gold hoop that pierced the left ear midway up. No breasts or hips at fifteen.

The flat and square that was Jules.

I could kiss it good, Jules crooned.

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Zen was watching her grandmother walking toward the barn. Ezra carefully balanced a plate covered with a white cloth napkin. She opened the top button of her dress before opening the barn door. Zen turned back to Jules.

How you know how good?

I got a girlfriend.

You ain't got no girlfriend.

Yes I do. I got a woman. Dorsie.

Liar.

Let me kiss your pussy and I'll show you, Jules said.

You a freak.

You a freak.

Zen giggled then pulled Jules on top of her, feeling with her tongue the persistence of Jules's.

Before she felt Jules's hand slide inside her shorts, inside her panties.

Before Jules slid inside her.



That particular afternoon, Wayland Cumbow was standing at his work bench, his back turned, sharpening the blade of a handsaw, when his wife stepped into the barn. She closed the patch of door behind her. The swath of daylight Wayland was using to see by disappeared.

The barn smelled of damp wood, oily tools, rusting dreams. A pile of lumber he'd planned to use to replank the front porch languished beside the broken lawn mower he'd bought at a flea market long ago. He'd stocked corners with unopened cans of house paint, shellac, and wood finishing supplies.

The set of Queen Anne chairs were still in the horse's stall.

A refrigerator, truck engine, three black and white televisions, and a porcelain Victorian tub, his intentions, sat in a pile in the middle of the barn.

Ezrah placed the plate of potato salad and fried chicken sandwich