

AND IT
BEGINS
LIKE
THIS

LaTanya
McQueen



Black
Lawrence
Press



Black
Lawrence
Press

www.blacklawrence.com

Executive Editor: Diane Goettel
Book and Cover Design: Amy Freels

Copyright © LaTanya McQueen 2018
ISBN: 978-1-62557-703-0

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical articles or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher: editors@blacklawrencepress.com

Published 2018 by Black Lawrence Press.
Printed in the United States.

*For those who have yet to be seen,
and for those who have yet to be heard.*

Contents

I. In the Name of the Fathers	1
II. Before You Throw Her Body Down	15
III. After Water Comes the Fire	28
IV. And Lest You Forget	41
V. If My Heart Should Confess	53
VI. As For Me And My House	58
VII. And For By Grace	71
VIII. Glory Be Her Name	84
IX. The Inheritors	97
X. A Plumb, Falling	115

In the Name of the Fathers

In Caswell County, North Carolina if one were to drive down U.S. Route 158, you'd come to the intersection of U.S. Route 150. Turn right on 150, and a little ways on you'll see a placard for Bedford Brown:

*Bedford Brown, U.S. Senator, 1829–30, State Legislator,
Opponent of Secession, 1860.
This is "Rose Hill." His Home.*

The placard seems easy to miss if you're not looking for it. It's not often one pays attention to the signs of history, and in the summer when the wind sways it could be partially obscured by the trees. Past this placard and on down a road you can barely see you'd eventually find Brown's plantation home, known colloquially as the Bedford Brown House. In 1973 it was listed in the National Register of Historic Places, but it's a private residence now so there are no tours. Without context the house looks unremarkable. From photos, it is a two-story Colonial style house, the exterior painted white with dark green shutters. Thick rose bushes frame the front. If you're there in the summer, one can imagine the smell of wild roses filling the air.

Near this plantation, hidden among the looming cedar trees, is a small unpaved road, a path really, once known to my family as Siddle Road, and it is here at this crossing where the origins of my family history begins.

Let's start with what I know.

My grandfather's name was Marvin Siddle. He was the second youngest of twelve children. One of Marvin's older brothers, William, bore the same name of his father—William Lovelace Siddle, listed also as Wells on the 1920 census. This is confusing until I remember how notoriously inaccurate census records were. "What's your husband's name?" I imagine the census taker asking, his throat scratchy from thirst, as he stood on the front stoop of yet another farm. "I can't hear you. Say it again? Well?"

So Well L. Siddle, nicknamed sometimes Billie by his family, formally called William (named after his father), who is listed as mulatto on this census.

This is what I know.

I also know that there is an earlier 1880 census for a William Siddle, also married, but this one—this one listed as white.

"We should have been Browns," my godmother tells me. She is also my mother's cousin. They grew up on neighboring farms and worked the tobacco fields together. Despite this parallel, once the evening came my godmother would venture home to schoolwork whereas my mother continued working the fields far late into the night. There's guilt in her voice when we talk of the past and I've often wondered how much of their upbringing factored into what their lives would become. It's a question I sense she's thought about as well but I dare not ever ask.

"The census may say Siddle," she explains, "but it should have been Brown, had the mother named the children after her slave name, but she didn't. They have the surname of another man, a white one."

The woman my godmother is talking about is Leanna Brown, my great-great-grandmother. Leanna Brown, nicknamed by her children as Granny Brown, once a slave of the Bedford Browns.

The folklore in my family has always been that Leanna "had 'em up" or took William Siddle, the father of her children, to court to make sure they carried his name. This would have been during the height of Reconstruction, before Jim Crow took its fierce hold of the South.

“I never believed my father when he told me the story. I always thought he made it up, but I’ve learned through research that during that time plenty of women did something similar. So while I didn’t believe him before I believe him now,” she said.

It took my mother’s death to make me question the pieces of her life and the person I knew. I’ve begun to reexamine what could have been possible as explanation for the way she was.

Tell me though, how does one begin to find the truth in the past? Who do you turn to when most of the people who could have known are gone?

If a given name can be a marker of a cultural identity then my name is marked as black. I knew this as a child. I told myself what I hated was the pause of uncertainty on the first day of class when a teacher did roll. “Laa—” they’d begin, the uncertainty in their voice. “Just tell me what it is,” finally saying as they sighed with resignation.

I hated also the misspellings that inevitably happened. The sheer unwillingness to learn, instead writing their own versions of a signifier of my identity.

These were the reasons I used as justification when I asked my mother if I could have my name changed. Deep down, my mother had always resented my name as well. Perhaps it was because my father might have mistakenly told her the story of why he picked it. (“I knew a girl with that name and I thought she was the hottest thing I ever saw!”) Or it could be because of the simple fact that my father gave it to me. At the time they were in the midst of a divorce and she could have used this as a tactic of revenge. I suspect though that her reasons were the same ones I’d finally admit to myself that I also had. She hated the names associations—that I am black, that before anyone knew me they would know my name and what it signified.

My father, for obvious reasons, would not agree to the decision to change my name. “Why don’t you want your name?” he would say over and over to a crying child on the phone. “Why don’t you want to be who you are?”

What I am interested in now are the ways in which a series of circumstances and actions can contribute to the people we become.

“Be glad you’re not dark,” I remember my mother telling me as a child. “Be glad you have light skin and good hair that doesn’t kink up too much. People will like you more. Not too much, because you’re still black, but more.”

I will think of my mother’s words often throughout my life. They will help to explain the reasons for why as a child I will scrub my skin raw, ashamed even then of my blackness. I’ll think of them when, like with my name, I’ll seek to change other parts of myself. My hair will grow out long. I’ll wear blue contact lenses. The combination of these making acquaintances and friends question. “What are you?” they’ll ask, reaching out for the briefest of seconds to touch my hair.

And I’ll lie when people ask me my race. They’ll always ask and I’ll tell them I am mixed. I’ll say whatever I think I can get away with. “Which one of your parents is white?” they’ll always assume, and this will be where I always falter, wondering which one of my parents to erase.

My mother grew up on a farm in a place called Ruffin, North Carolina. Ruffin is less than thirteen miles away from the Locust Hill Township in Caswell County. Locust Hill, specifically an area called Rose Hill, is where the original Siddle farm was located.

The story here is that there were two plantations. The first belonging to the Bedford Browns and nearby, down a path, a smaller plantation of a white family named Siddles. A man named Will Siddle had a relationship with Leanna Brown, a slave or servant of the Bedford Browns.

Their relationship produced three children, one being my grandfather William, sometimes called Billie, Siddle. Some time when Billie is older he’ll get enough money together to buy land and build that house in Ruffin. That house will be the one my grandfather will grow up in and eventually my mother will too.

I’ve tried, many times, to fully render in my mind the image of that house. It was white, two floors, with a black roof. No indoor plumbing,

at least not while my mother is growing up, and she'll tell me about her late night ventures in the dark to the outhouse. She'll talk about her fear of snakes reaching up from the hole. The smell.

Open the front door and you're in the living room. Adjacent to this and separated by two large French doors is the kitchen. In my mind, I'll convince myself I remember these doors but really what I'm remembering is the telling of the doors to me throughout the years. A hallway leads to a staircase where if one were to walk up they'd be taken to one of the three bedrooms. Downstairs are where the other two bedrooms are—my mother's, which she shared with her brother, and her parents'. Further down the hallway is the kitchen where there's another door leading out back.

None of this is of particular interest except for one detail: a door is affixed to the entryway leading upstairs. This door will be locked. No one except for Mayo, my great-uncle, who lives with the rest of the family, will ever be allowed to go up there.

Let me rephrase that—it is not “no one except for my great-uncle will be allowed up there” but rather my great-uncle will not be allowed in the rest of the house. The locked door, I'm told, is not to prevent the rest of the family from interacting with him, but to prevent him from the rest of the family.

“Mayo?” On the phone, my grandmother pauses to think. I'd been looking through census records when I stopped at this name, not recognizing it. “Oh yeah. We called him Pigaboy—Pigger sometimes. It was always that. Not Mayo.”

“Pigger?” I ask, not going further. My grandmother does not like to talk about the family of the husband she was once married to. It's been decades since his death, but my grandmother still flinches when I ask about him or his relatives. There is the sense she was not treated well by them. Even though she'll never tell me, my father will relay stories of how she was beaten by her husband and how his brothers and sisters disregarded her because her skin was not light like theirs.

Most of them were light-skinned, some bordering on even looking white. If you saw a picture you'd think they were Italian maybe, or Jewish, and they could have passed if they wanted.

It bears mentioning that like my grandmother, Mayo was darker too.

"Yeah, because he ate like a pig," my grandmother says. "He ate his food like a dark little pig, you know Pigger. Pigaboy."

"You know what Pigger sounds an awful lot like," I say to her, thinking of all this.

"Yes, well," my grandmother responds. She swallows hard in the phone. "I realize this now."

Mayo, born 1920, and sometimes called Pigaboy or Pigger by his family.

As I've mentioned, Mayo will live upstairs. The downstairs door that leads to the rest of the house will be locked from him. His only route of access will be to the door out back. His meals will be placed on the back porch where he'll either eat them or carry them back upstairs.

There are reasons for all this. Mayo eats like a pig so his nickname will be Pigaboy, shortened to Pigger. My family will say he's unstable, explaining that there were been incidents but never explicitly telling me what they were. To keep the rest of the family safe, especially the children, the doors had to be locked. Mayo couldn't be with everyone else, he had to be separated. He had to eat his food out back. It was all they knew what to do. It was the only way.

Mayo's death record shows that he died on January 17, 1973 at the age of fifty-two. What it doesn't show is that he died upstairs in his bedroom and that it will be days before the rest of the family notices.

"Down in Yanceyville Billie went as white," my godmother tells me. "That's what I've always heard, and remember it was eight miles to Yanceyville from Caswell and this was horse and buggies time, you actually had to travel to get there. So why would the people there think that this man was white? Under what circumstances would they imagine that to be the case? The only reason I can think of is because he went there to see

his father, and if he's with his father out in public that means his father must have claimed him—not only claiming but helping him, and in light of all that it fits in to the paradigm that the relationship his father had with him was consensual.”

There is a slight pause. Before I'm able to respond she continues again.

“Also, in the consensual relationships I've read about, the child bears the name of the father.”

In *The Fluidity of Race: “Passing” in the United States, 1880-1940*, Emily Nix and Nancy Qian estimate that “using the full population of historical Censuses from 1880-1940, we document that over 19% of black males ‘passed’ for white at some point during their lifetime.”

Billie Siddle, my great-grandfather, will periodically pass for white. I'll hear versions of this from my mother as well, but she'll explain he left to pass and work the coal mines in Virginia, making enough money to come back and buy the land and build his own farm the family will live on decades later.

If Billie could pass, and if in fact there were circumstances when he did, then what made him decide not to?

Maybe the answer to this question is the behind the reason he'll have issues with skin color the rest of his life. He'll pass them on to his children, each of them harboring the same prejudices, and they'll pass them on to their children—to my mother and eventually to me.

Billie Siddle will die on November 11, 1923, at the age of 48. The cause of death being chronic nephritis, a disease caused by infections, most commonly caused by autoimmune disorders that affect the organs, like lupus, a disease my mother will come to suffer from.

On the death certificate, in the space for the name of the father, there is only a question mark.

In the story of Cain and Abel from the book of Genesis, Eve bears two sons—Cain, a tiller of the earth, and Abel, a shepherd. When they both offer sacrifices to God, Abel's is respected more, much to the jealousy

of Cain. Acting out of his own anger, he takes Abel into a field and kills him, and when God asks him where Abel is, he answers, "I know not, am I my brother's keeper?"

After God finds out the truth about Abel's murder, he curses Cain for what he's done. Cain pleads with God, explaining that this punishment is too much for him to bear. If he is a fugitive and a vagabond, then anyone who happens to find him will kill him. Hearing this, God tells him that whoever slays him will have vengeance taken upon them sevenfold. "And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him."

Theologians have interpreted this mark in many different ways. Some believe it to be a symbol of God's promise of protection. Others have suggested that the mark was a distinguishing characteristic God gave so that people would see and not harm him. In the 18th century it was taught that the Cain's mark was black skin and that his descendants were black and still under the "the curse of Cain."

There is no clear consensus as to which of these definitions is being referred to regarding Cain's mark.

In the famous Clark doll experiments conducted in the 1940s, husband and wife team Kenneth and Mamie Clark gave a child two different dolls, identical except for their skin color and hair. One doll was white with yellow hair and the other doll was brown with black hair. Then, the child was asked questions like "Which is the pretty doll?" "Which is the bad doll?"

Of course, you know this story already, even what the answers were, that their findings showed the internalized racism present among the children, the majority of which showed a preference for the white doll.

In 2006, Kiri Davis recreated the experiment for her documentary *A Girl Like Me*. Davis found that, nearly seventy years later, nothing much had changed. Girls still picked the white doll. The pretty doll. The good doll.

I do not need to wonder which doll I would have picked had I been asked. Growing up, I never had black dolls. The choice for me was never even a possibility.

Seeking information on the mixed or african american siddle family. Possible starting with a Billie Siddle. —Kim

A message posted on a genealogy forum. The date January 15, 2002.

I'm able to send to a response to the original poster. *Hi Kim, I believe I am someone you're looking for. Please write me back.*

No one will answer.

Unlike with Billie, there is next to nothing on Leanna Brown. She was married but I'm unsure of the dates. If she was a slave then it's possible her marriage would not have been recorded.

In search of answers I decide to look through the cohabitation records for the county. If I'm able to document when she was married then perhaps it will clarify the nature of her relationship with William Siddle. It could potentially offer clues to who the other children were.

Cohabitation records were created to legitimize marriages and children born to those in slavery. In these records, the information can include names of the individuals, ages, places where they were born, the names of their last known slave holders, and approximate year of marriage or cohabitation. These records can often be found in local courthouses, state archives, and libraries.

I check the website of the North Carolina State Archives and it says that cohabitation records are known to have survived for the following counties, but Caswell County is not included in this list.

Once, in graduate school I fell in love with a white boy who was unaware of my feelings. One night we were in a Starbucks talking. The cashier had begun her closing up ritual but we continued to stay.

I showed him an article about a celebrity who'd recently made some racist comments regarding his own dating preferences. I mentioned it off the cuff even though there was more to be said—a larger conversation about racial bias and prejudices in dating preferences, for one thing, or the effects of European beauty standards on women of color, or even the current problems in interracial dating. There was more to be interrogated

between us but the minutes were quickly ticking by and soon we were the only customers left.

“That’s some bullshit,” he responded. “Who does this guy think he is?”

His anger, far worse than mine, made me believe he was trying to tell me something more, but then I remembered this was all a surprise to him. He had no idea what it was like to experience these attitudes day in and out. He was a conventionally attractive male with parents who would have given him the world. His anger came from a place where injustice was never a reality.

In the end, nothing ever happened between us. He fell in love with someone else. Her skin the color of cream.

On her Facebook page I find a photo of the two of them. Many times there will be moments when my thoughts will get the best of me and I’ll go back to that photo and wonder if the reason nothing ever happened between us was because I did not look the way he was wanting.

Before the death of my mother I was not a person who talked about race. I was a person who actively avoided it throughout most of my life. It was easy when you were the only black person in a room, when for years you were the only black person you know. You find ways to adapt to the world around you, joining in with all the appropriate cultural signifiers, and because my skin was light enough I thought somehow I would be enough, that I’d be accepted beyond the Other that I am.

My desire to fit these pieces I have in a certain way is strong, undeniable, but I find myself asking what to make of them. How does one begin to compile these bits of fact, these stories and anecdotes, together into a way of understanding?

I struggle to turn them into a narrative that makes sense, so all I can do is offer them in the hope that somewhere one can find the truth.

According to population projections by the U.S. Census Bureau, by the year 2044 whites will become the minority. There will be a growth of new minorities, from Asians, Hispanics, and those identifying as multi-racial. This last group—multiracials—will more than triple in number.

The same day I read this in the news I find an article about the rise of ethnic plastic surgeries cropping up in the U.S. Rhinoplasties to sharpen the flat shape of an ethnic-looking nose, for example, or “facial contouring” procedures in which the bones of the jaw are cut to make the appearance a v-shape.

“I think we’re kind of losing ethnic niches. I don’t think there’s going to be a black race or a white race or an Asian race,” Dr. Michael Jones, a plastic surgeon, is quoted saying in the article. “Essentially, in 200 years, we’re going to have one race.”

On my teaching evaluations my students say I discuss race too much. They are angry because in talking about American literature, I force them to read Charles W. Chesnutt, the first African American fiction writer. We read the slave narratives of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass. We read W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. I bring in recordings of the Harlem Renaissance poets and let them hear the music and rhythm in Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” They listen to the songs of Negro spirituals. I bring in Toni Morrison and Amiri Baraka, and I make them read James Baldwin’s “Going to Meet the Man,” a story that makes my hands shake every time I read it. That day, I spend an hour in front of my mostly white class talking about the Klan. I show them pictures of lynchings, one after the other after the other. I tell them of the brutal, ugly history of our country so that they can try to understand the world Baldwin has come from, but they never do.

The day I teach Baldwin everyone is bracing to hear the decision about Michael Brown and so the first thing I do is take a piece of chalk and begin writing. On the board I write the names I’ve collected of the black men and women throughout history who’ve been murdered—whether lynched or shot by police. One by one I write their names, filling the board with my scrawled script.

I leave it up during the remainder of the class, and towards the end, when I feel my own energy draining, I tell him that it’s important to remember. “There is a pattern,” I say, repeating the theory my godmother once told me. She believes that in looking at history, in seeing the moments

of racial progress for African Americans there has always been a steep backlash in response. It happened after the Civil War with the creation of the KKK, it happened after Reconstruction with the rise of the Jim Crow era in the South, and it happened after the Civil Rights Movement with the KKK's reemergence.

"Recognize it and maybe you can change it, because the problem is we keep forgetting."

Then I erase the board, slowly, hoping with this action the point hits home, but they are already packing their bags and out the door.

"I used to see Leanna as a victim," my godmother tells me. "She was in the sense that she was a black woman and didn't have any power, but the more I delve into the past, the more I've come to fully understand how much people don't fit into the boxes history wants us to put them in."

I've wanted to believe that the basis of their relationship was love, that Leanna Brown took the name for her children because she wanted a piece of this man to hold onto, to be carried down among the generations. It is a story that goes down better than what history is known to provide—that her children were the product of rape.

I'm not sure how much I believe in generational curses, if the sins of the fathers shall be passed on to the children and then to their children's children.

Yet the patterns in my family are certainly there, repeating among generation to generation, and so for me the name carries with it a mark, a stain. It is more than the mark of my race, with that name are years of self-hatred, of anger, of wrongs done I can barely fathom and will never fully understand.

So how then can a name that carries so much pain with it have come from love?

Of course though, my students are unaware about race. To them I am just a black teacher talking about race when they don't want to talk about race. They are unaware of the history that has come to define my existence.

“Don’t you understand?” I want to explain. *“Do you even understand how long it’s taken me to get here? To get to this point of even the acknowledgement of who I am?”*

I’m in a bar sitting alone. A man comes up and sits down next to me. “Grading, I see?” he interrupts, nodding toward my stack of papers, and for a moment I am willing to go along, to be distracted.

“Yes.”

“I want to ask—” and here it comes. I know the question before he even finishes, but he is looking at me and whatever expression on my face makes him stop. Instead, he tries a different tactic and softly mutters Spanish.

“What?”

“Oh,” he says, realizing his mistake, but the question is there and he still must know the answer. “I thought you were maybe one of my Dominican sisters? I’ve been hoping to find some of my people here in this town.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, then pick up another paper.

“So you’re not?” he continues, not taking the hint. “I mean, *you’re* not?”

“I’m black.”

“Really?” He draws the word out so it sounds more like an accusation than a question.

“Yes.”

This is the part where I’m supposed to offer up evidence. I’m supposed to explain how both of my parents were light-skinned, or mention how I have my mother’s curls. I’ll explain how I have great aunts and uncles who passed, and the colorism issues most of us face, but by then I’ll have gone on too long. I’ll have said too much. What will be wanted is an explanation, not an indictment or a history lesson on racial constructions.

This time though I say nothing. I reach for my wallet and take out a twenty, placing it on the counter. I grab my stack of papers and stand, leaving the bar and the man with just my simple answer, my affirmation—yes.

This time it is enough.

I spend my time now going through the Civil Action Court Records of North Carolina. They are searchable online. In this collection, span-

ning from 1709 to 1970, are records consisting of civil disputes pertaining to land ownership, unpaid debts, slave manumissions, divorces, and the legitimization of children born out of wedlock.

Somewhere buried in these pages of pages of documents I feel as if I'll find my answer. If ever there was a place to look this is it—the answer to the name and how it came to be in my family.

Because I do not have a specific date to go by there are thousands of pages I must search. There are so many names. Some of the documents are faded and it's difficult to see. My eyes squint trying to make out the cursive.

There is a chance I will go through all these and find nothing. Perhaps there was never anything to find.

Yet, I am here. At night when the world has quieted, I sit at my desk, coffee in hand. Each scan takes a few seconds to load and I wait and sip. Names flash across my screen—names of strangers, of brothers and sisters bonded together, of mothers and daughters, of fathers and sons, names of the searching, names of the lost, names waiting for someone who will one day find and claim them.