

Copyright © A. McCorkle  
Goucher College Fiction Workshop  
All Rights Reserved

CAN BLACK GIRLS SWIM COLLECTION - PART 1



**SHE SAW HIM DISAPPEAR BY THE RIVER,  
THEY ASKED HER TO TELL WHAT HAPPENED,  
ONLY TO DISCOUNT HER MEMORY.**

Lorna Simpson, *Waterbearer*, 1986

[[Image ID: The dark-skinned woman in the photograph is depicted wearing a loose-fitting white dress while pouring water out of two pitchers. She is not facing the viewer. The text is as follows: “She saw him disappear by the river, They asked her to tell what happened, Only to discount her memory.”]]

## THE WATERBEARER

it started with a song. or at least she thought she could call it a song. it had a cadence, a tempo, a beat. rhythmic and haunting, almost devotional, almost religious. it was like someone was singing into the wind with everything they had, and somehow she felt all of it, every note thumping against her chest. physically though, lana felt her thin nightclothes, now soaked and floppy, whipping in the wind at the peak. she had been staring down, searching at the sea below for the source of the noise. it sounded so much like singing though. aching and beautiful, she thought she could hear the words in the violent screech.

the call had propelled her from her warm bed this night, into the black, freezing rain. back to the cliff face on the aptly named, “chiller’s point.” on wobbly legs, she moved closer and closer to the edge, looking out onto the waves. she really couldn’t see much, it was late and dark out, the moon was the only false light illuminating the sky behind clouds. but it was enough. it was enough for the moment. it was enough for her to see down into the salty world she feared the most.

her fear of water hadn’t deterred her though. the idea of falling to her death into the black depths, sliding down the craggy cliffside and ripping her body asunder, bothered her more. it was the force of her imagined fall, not her childhood dreams of drowning and being dragged down into the watery depths of the ocean that scared her. her thoughts swirled in growing anticipation of her descent, sending her mind wandering about, what would it feel like, how would her body be defeated by this unseeing giant, how would she crumble beneath the waves? *those* thoughts did bother her a bit.

when the thunder crackled, she shook slightly, looking up to the sky. above her, the old lighthouse that she supposed she *owned* now, towered in the darkness, blocking a bit of the rain.

she should have followed the path, she thought, her squelching slippers would be thanking her for it. but she didn't and she might not now; tonight was full of surprises and firsts and differences, what was another? lana wanted to laugh at that, how silly her firsts always were but now realized that she couldn't without coughing from the cold. she had forgotten a coat. real shoes. even an umbrella for this. it was the *song*, she knew it had to be. hearing it made her stop, just drop everything, everything she could have been doing; dusting the mantel, her wedding band on the nightstand, her embroidery project she had been working on in bed, her whistling kettle, everything.

the song, the song she just couldn't get it out of her head. it was like it surrounded her, pointed her out, beckoning her nearer to it with its ferocity. the hymn sharpened to a point suddenly, drawing a shivering lana's attention back to the sea. it felt almost animalistic in its tenor. hungering and yearning, so painfully. calling on the sky for something, anything like a prayer of salvation. but from what? lana fidgeted at the prospect of learning. the sky's only response seemed to be the rain, the thunder, and a pulling at the waves below as if to push back. pushing it back into the direction of the shore. something on land wanted off.

the sound had pushed her to this cliff, and the sky had shown her she was not alone in that. pushing and pulling the sealine back and forth in an almost frenzied manner; in all her years here, she'd never seen a storm quite like this. but she couldn't think over the incessant, constant, and mind-numbingly *beautiful* singing. it was maddening, how lana could feel every inch of the sadness and pain contained in the garbled voice, she felt a little insane, walking through the pouring rain like this to find its possible source. but she knew she had to. there was something, something so familiar about the feelings she had for the call. and something in her told her she must put an end to it before it was too late.

behind her, she had left a well-lit route home, even beneath the downpour, she could see the two glowing orange lamp posts. all down the dirt paths and streets, and secret hideaways she had found in her youth, straight back from where she came. lana felt a wave of regret cut into her as if she knew she might be leaving it all behind, as if she was standing at a crossroads, with her choices unknown. she was interrupted when the call sounded in her again, vibrating her chest inside and out until she began shuddering. she *had* to find it.

with a deep, steady breath, she mustered up the strength to begin her descent. she knew the cliff face was not the most forgiving to people with no climbing gear or sense of direction and just thin nightclothes. but still, the adrenaline coursing through her gave her grip and the prayer on her lips, much-needed fortitude. she kept her limbs close to her, as she lowered her body down the rocks, only reaching with one arm, and moving her whole body down to that spot. slowly but surely, using her fingers and toes to grip, she started reflecting on how dangerous this all could be, just a little. she hadn't climbed this cliff since she was a child, back when her mama and her friend went on adventures. back then, the low tide had given the children a nice pastime, splashing into the tidepools and excavating as many sea creatures as they could find. lana's mind flickered between the friend and her mother. that was the day, the day most things began to change. nearly sliding on a loose rock, lana begins counting her blessings and shifts her focus to her mother.

Miss Kathryn McGrady. the name she lived and was born by, having never been married, no hyphenation or drop, her maiden name was that of a wonder. one would write her last name with a capitalized "M," and a capitalized "G," that was the first writing lesson she could remember with her mother. a great big, tall "M," with the small, almost lonesome c standing close to it, and a curling cursive "G." made no sense for a black woman to have a name

like that. in lana's later years, she would come to find that it was a most interesting distinction. McGrady. irish in origin, anglicized from gaelic. visitors and locals alike seemed surprised by her quiet mother's looks when meeting her for the first time, though they held their tongues. with broad noses and finely crafted lips colored with darkness, she and lana were something of marvels to them. but on the beach, they could be humans for themselves. when her mother became overwhelmed with the townsfolk, she, a lot of the time, would try to spend more time at her job tending to the lighthouse. the solitary structure took her from lana often, too many times to count. but on rare days, where the sun was shining and the tides were low, her mother would tell her:

“come now, tink, let's go find an adventure.”

and they would. every time they visited her mother's favorite spot along the shore, they discovered something different. sometimes a new pretty stone, her mother could tell her what it was made of and how it came to be, or a hollowed-out shell of a mollusk or even a living crustacean lana had fished out from a pool. mother never let her keep them. even now, that fact made lana smile, how angry her little self had been to not have and to hold another creature in their home. when her mother refused, lana felt her tiny heartbreak into pieces and then proceeded to be as theatrical as possible.

other days, her mother would just sing, practicing hymnals and praise music for sunday worship, keeping her voice low and wistful—letting her disjointed songs float on the waves and against the rocks for no one but the sea and her child. some songs lana knew, like how great is our God, and she would attempt to sing along to this. but sometimes her mother would sing to her in something quite unlike english, a bit more magical and floaty around her mouth. when she

did this, her mother looked like she was elsewhere, singing to a place far beyond lana's memory. and sometimes lana would try to sing her own words back.

*Cuiridh mi a-mach thu, O Thighearna; oir thog thu suas mi, agus cha tug thu air mo  
nàimhdean gàirdeachas a dhèanamh orm.*

*O Thighearna mo Dhia, ghlaodh mi riut, agus leighis thu mi.*

*O Thighearna, thug thu suas m'anam às an uaigh: ghlèidh thu mi beò, airson nach  
rachainn sìos don t-sloc.*

*Seinn ris an Tighearna, O sibhse a naoimh, agus thoir buidheachas aig cuimhneachan a  
naomhachd.*

lana missed those days. and those songs. she especially missed them now.

she remembered one day in particular though; it was the first time she had brought her friend with them to their spot because she wanted her to like her. perhaps a little more than usual. little lana tugged her friend all up and down this beach that day, her mother keeping her distance as she smoked a bit walking near the water. neither of the girls really liked the smell, so they moved further windward, searching the tidepools for mussels and salamanders. you know, kid stuff. the other girl loved the scary stuff, so lana wanted to do her best to impress her. so in all her early preteen wisdom, lana had an idea.

in hindsight, it was a *very* bad one. but hindsight is 20/20, and she had just turned 11. she began climbing up, up on the craggy rocks leading to the lighthouse, because her friend would love this right? this was cool, right? so with a smirk, she began her ascent, moving her arms up and up and her legs as fast as she would go, scrambling and shouting at her friend to watch what she could do. truth be told, it scared her friend, who only liked scary things for show, but the girl kept her fear to herself, daring lana to go higher and higher. lana made it more than five or six feet, way higher than she's ever gone before. below her, she could see the girl, her red hair and pale form like a beacon against the shore, and she looked like she was shaking.

“come down now,” she said, an edge in her voice that was uncharacteristically fearful for her. “you’ve had your fun lana now come on!” lana had started to laugh at her right before she fell, a loose rock in her hands joining her in her descent.

she could laugh about it now, in the present. she could really laugh about it now, and how this feels so much like a déjà vu, and how it feels so familiar, and so wrong, if it didn’t make her feel like crying so much. but still, lana moved her body slowly and surely down to the sand below.

the rain seemed to taper off now, leaving only a fine mist, though lana could not stop her shaking for the life of her. she couldn’t feel her legs anymore and her hands felt cut and bruised. she couldn’t tell how long she had been moving, but it felt like hours, it might have been hours. but the driving force of this pursuit was more powerful now, more potent and ringing in her ears and her chest and her mouth. lana could feel the song everywhere it was so painful, all she could do was think of her mother once more.

that day did not end with the fall, no, that was only the beginning. the girl, sorcha, woke her with tears, hovering over lana’s face, too afraid to touch her. lana was fine though, not a very large scratch in her head but enough to bleed into her thick hair. she would not find that out until later but she could guess from her newfound dizziness.

the crying only ended with a lot of assuring hugs and a forehead kiss, a first for both of them, and one they often smile about. back then, lana had been curious though, why hadn’t her mother stopped her, or even heard sorcha’s yelling? sorcha had been quite loud, which had originally worried lana but it had taken almost ten minutes to console the girl and her mother had not come around the bend to check on them. sorcha began to wonder too, and trying to tough it

out, lana volunteered herself to check on her mother. ever the crybaby, sorcha had pouted at her but allowed lana to leave while she gathered their playthings.

lana was used to her mother leaving her like this, sorcha wasn't. this wasn't the first time lana had been left in the sand to play alone, but sorcha hadn't. and something in her heart always told lana that she shouldn't tell others that. her mother was a quiet woman yes, but she was a sorrowful one as well. lana'd never caught her crying too much but she could tell when her red eyes were from something other than chopped white onions in the kitchen. her mother had been a private woman, lana guessed now that she was much older, but maybe even an ashamed woman. more ashamed of her sadness than its effects.

the beach though, a safe haven for the both of them, seemed to grow her mother's melancholy. growing up, she had a few guesses; maybe lana's daddy was a fisherman who got lost at sea after fighting a kraken like in the stories she would tell her, or maybe even her mother's mom, maybe she was lost there too. lana didn't know though, and that made her little legs move a little faster. then and now, as she struggled to control her breath, that was when she first heard it. the song.

and both then and now, she was reminded of a story her mother told her. one night lana wanted a new story; not one of hero-kings or the fae folk in the woods of the highlands, she wanted a true, honest to goodness story that she had never heard before. and she told her mother as much. her mother smiled at her girl from her vanity, twisting her thick coils down for the night. everything about her mother, from her smile, to her hair, her plush white robe, the strong smells of butters and oils, everything about her felt rounded and soft and safe.

from where lana was sitting on the bed, she could see the back of her mother's neck, the skin pricked up by ink in the pattern of two parallel waves. lana asked her about it once and she



told her it was a birth sign, which little lana misunderstood as a birthmark at first. but her mother explained that it had something to do with the stars. but her mother called it “the waterbearer,” the visionary, the supporter, and holder of memories. it was such an impressive feature to her child, that lana would regularly ask to touch it and to test if she could feel the ocean’s waves on her mother’s dark skin.

“a new story lovie? what, you gettin’ too old for me tellin’ you them half-truths, huh?” she questioned softly, chuckling. not quite understanding what she meant, her daughter still persisted, focused on her quest for a new parable. lana shook her head and said she wanted a story about the water. “tell me about the water, mama.”

“the water?” her mother stopped rubbing her face, pausing to hold lana’s gaze in the glass. they had the same eyes. her mother was the first to look away, busying herself with closing caps, “i’m fresh out of stories about that, lana, give me another.”

sensing something move in her mother, lana dared to chase it, “tell me why you look at the water like that.”

her mother turned around to fully look at her daughter, eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “like what, my love? what are you talking about?”

“like how i look at the lighthouse when you leave me.”

her mother’s face momentarily twisted in fresh pain, as she sharply took in a breath to steady herself. but the moment was brief and her mother only looked away for a moment. and a moment was all lana needed when she felt a tear fall, quietly wiping it away, hoping her mother did not notice.

but she did, like she always did. and with her notice she held her daughter’s tears in her hands, twisting around in her chair to catch them. lana was a big crier as a child, so it was often

in her fits of rage, in her emotional outbursts in school, when the underlying reasoning was fighting to the surface of her mouth, she would just let it all out in water.

kathryne let her child's breathing slow, and lana's shuddering nearly ceased before her mother started speaking.

"lana." she was firm, "breathe." they breathed in time with each other for a few moments, lana could taste the mint on her mother's breath.

"you wanna know about the water, lovie?" lana nodded slowly and her mother let out a sigh. after standing from her vanity chair, her mother moved onto her bed and heaved lana in her lap. they sat still for a moment, her mother burying her face in lana's hair. lana fondly remembered how much her mother had loved hugs, and would squeeze the girl tight every night, smelling of mint and thick shea. a memory lana held fast to. in a somber, hushed voice her mother told her, "you've won yourself a story, lana, i'll tell you a good one too." her mother's voice shook a little there, twinged with almost harsh and defeated laughter, and it made lana hold her tighter.

"when i go to the lighthouse, i'm looking for something." her mother said to her, pulling away to look at lana in the eyes. her mother smiled at her and pushed back her soft curls, and rubbed her sniffling face. "i'm never going there to leave you, lovie. just need to find something."

"the boats can remember their own way back without you for one night, can't they?" lana grumbled into her shoulder, not feeling bad for it when it left her lips, meaning it as harshly as it came out. what on earth could be more important than her?

"bubbie, that's not why i work there, and you know that." her mother said, softly rocking her. "i want people to rememb—

*Take me to the water  
Take me to the water  
Take me to the water  
to be baptized.*

*None but the righteous  
None but the righteous  
None but the righteous  
shall see God.*

*I love Jesus  
I love Jesus  
I love Jesus  
Yes, I do.*

—so they killed them. and dumped their bodies back into the sea.” her words had a sort of finality to them, unlike when she spoke about mythical things and fantastical beings in the stories. it sent a shiver up lana’s spine.

“so lovie, you have to promise me,” she lowered her voice, holding lana’s face tight, almost painfully, “never listen to the song, alright? do you promise?”

lana nodded, chest hammering, making a bit of noise to let her mother know she was serious. and after a moment of searching her eyes in the darkness, the woman seemed to be satisfied, letting go of her little girl to hold her in her arms again.

lana curled into her mother then, trying to slow her beating heart, and quietly vowed to never ask her about the water again.

by the time the remembrance of the tale had left little lana’s mind, she had found why her mother had not come. she was in the water. her sweet soft mother was standing waist-deep in the sea, arms at her sides, walking. lana’s vision shook a bit from her fall, but she knew what she

saw. her mother had lost her cigarette of course, and lana could see that her shawl was missing too. little lana felt the most frantic urge to find it, but fear rooted her in place as her eyes widened in terror and her breath left her gut. her mother was leaving her. again.

she didn't realize she was screaming. until she was running and could feel salty water catch in her windpipe. at this age, lana had scarcely grown to be three feet tall and not much of a swimmer like her mother, which this spelled disaster for the young girl, her as the pull of the undertow allowed for the ocean water do as it pleased with her person.

started with a scream that was then cut off with a choke when she slipped on something underfoot. next thing she knew, the water had overtaken her, she could feel salt in her eye sockets as the waves rolled over her body with little care. that's the thing about the ocean lana never loved; it always seemed too preoccupied to care about the little things it could destroy.

the rest of her fall from grace would haunt her dreams well into her 20s; dark water swallowing her whole, sorcha's far-off screams piercing her ears, the salt flooding her mouth. but the scariest part would never leave her, not for as long as she lived. every night, she would be cursed to dream this dream of watching her mother in the distance, walking slowly into the ocean. never to be found again. that, of course, never happened, but what if it did? a younger lana could not bear the thought.

she was dragged back to shore, opposite to a dying fish, lungs full of water, fighting for air. her mother had saved her, making quick work of reviving her, pressing down on her chest over and over until the girl coughed the water up. her vision and hearing were still swimming in the sea, but she could make out the face of her mother and her crying, "i'm sorry, lovie, im so so sorry."

but through her uncomfortable quivering, lana could hear it. the song. though, it was low, it was unmistakable. the powerful reverberati—

*I tell you it's gonna rain  
It's gonna rain  
You better get ready and bear this in mind  
God showed Noah the rainbow sign  
It won't be water but fire the next time.  
Way back in the bible days  
Noah told the people it's gonna rain  
But when he told them they paid him no mind  
And when it happened they were left behind*

—felt as if she had been coughing up briny water for weeks. and sorchá hadn't talked to her for even longer. she and her mother would not visit the beach again for another year or so, no matter how hard lana pleaded.

visiting the beach before had been....sacred for lana. it was as if visiting a hallowed grave, a long-forgotten soul that was once loved when they were whole. because that's what it felt like to be there with her mother. on the shore, her mother, albeit despondent and restlessly humming a tune lana could not place, she was more herself.

but their nearly final visit to the beach had awakened a bit of an obsession in her, a hunger for the same song her mother had warned her against.

lana grew to be a bit like her mother, a church singer with a similarly strong, resounding voice. but she would never take the role of first soprano like her mother, much too high for her timbre. but after drowning and as she grew, she could sing low. much like the groan of the sea.

but she also grew to be a minister as well, using her voice to preach the word of her God, to be a mouthpiece for all that she found holy, studying theology and the surrounding philosophies when she could. it was funny to sorchá though, lana's deep interest in religious

doctrine, because according to her, lana read more like a heretic, an almost blasphemous skeptic. because she always had questions, always wanted answers, both concrete and otherworldly. their time studying together often ended in multiple intoxicated nights, staring at the stars and discussing what could and could not be.

when lana asked her about the ocean deep, its creatures and its teeming life, sorcha would often sit with her in the sand and ask about the redeemer, and lana would use her voice to sing to her, to speak unto her, to breathe water into her. sorcha's family had been catholic, sorcha a bit far removed from it, but she was always entranced by the way lana's music felt when she sang out her verse.

*psalms 143, verse 8*

*Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul.*

later, when her mother and she finally came to odds in her adulthood, lana did the unforgivable—she left. she left the town she'd known, she left glowing orange lamp posts, the sea and the sky that reflected each other, sorcha and most of all she left her mother. in search of something else, a place she could never hear the song again.

she was not there when it truly happened, when it came to a boiling point for her mama and she finally surrendered. the doctors all told her it was a long time coming, an arrhythmic fibrillation that caused her heart to convulse so violent and so sudden, it was like a light being snuffed out. quick.

but something in lana could not believe that, could not believe that was what killed her. deep down, she knew it was a broken heart, a longing and loss, a truth lana could never give her.

heartbreakingly, she knew what was happening. she had always known. from the moment she stepped into the rainy night and descended the cliff. in the mist, the world on the beach seemed distorted, dark, and fraying at the edges, but there was still this dreadful and pressing feeling of “déjà vu” that she could not shake. she could taste the saltwater in her mouth, the pressure in her chest, the way her head spun from the imagined movement of waves, crashing over and over again over her head. the song felt so much like drowning and the aching of her heart, yearning and lost. the aching over her own, her mother’s, and her mother’s mother.

lana never met her. mina was her name and her mother took that -na naming convention to carve out her own child, a way to remember her by. her mother sometimes spoke of her with such reverence, claiming her mother had come back to her in the form of her child. lana had taken her face, her nose, her skin, her spirit, she often saw that in her.

once, when drawing a bath, her mother just stared at herself and her child for a few minutes, eyes shifting back and forth, and back and forth.

“we have her eyes.” her voice was even, and echoed in lana’s skull, somehow, almost hurting her with the emotion hidden in it. “you’re like a memory lana.”

in the misty, distorted world beach she saw her. her mother. her soft, sweet mother. standing on the surf, swaying with her back turned. she could tell it was her, she knew that tattoo like the back of her hand. lana fell to her knees almost instantly, the song now unbearable and near deafening. she could feel her head splitting under the pressure of water, new colors blooming from the lack of air, tearing into her sight. her lips felt wet and metallic, as did her nose, and her breathing felt severely labored, but there was something so vibrant about the pain. “suffering can be religious if you do it right,” lana remembered reading that somewhere. self-flagellation in the name of a foreigner’s God.

the song felt like a baptism, a wash of cool river water, flowing and unyielding. her mother had admitted to her once that that would have been her baptism when she was young, in the mississippi's holy water. bitterly, she never received that blessing.

but the song, the song seemed to give her that wish. lana could feel parts of herself falling away, both unclean and anew, there was a new terror in her growing in her chest about what she might become. she coughed up saltwater, letting it dribble out of her mouth and nose. she smiled, she couldn't tell if she tasted the ocean or blood anymore. and she didn't want to. she had her momma back.

lana looked up at her, staring wordlessly at her. they had not spoken when she was descending but her mother's eye was on her, intense and piercing.

*Went down to the river Jordan,  
Where John baptised three  
Well I walked to the devil in hell  
Sayin John ain't baptise me  
I say;  
Roll, Jordan, roll  
Roll, Jordan, roll  
My soul arise in heaven, Lord  
For the year when Jordan roll*

before her mother touched the waves, she looked back at her child. her skin shone blue in the moonlight. and still, they had the same eyes. both dark, both piercing, both searching for new truths within each other, trying so hard to convey something, anything to the other. lana had never seen her momma cry, but she knew she was now. and that ripped into her harder than the music.



“do you remember?” her mother did not speak this, nor did she sing it, but lana felt it. and it sent her head spinning, forcing all the water out. she had yet to cry over her mother, to even process what she was to her, how long she had been without her.

in an instant, the water touched her, and she was gone, melting away into seafoam.

Quoted features:

p. 1: [Lorna Simpson's Waterbearer](#) (more information in hyperlink)

p. 6: [Salm and Soul: Salm 30: Tiverton](#) (caution: autoplay)

p. 11: Take Me To The Water, To Be Baptized. Negro Spiritual

p. 13: [Salm and Soul: It's Gonna Rain](#) (caution: autoplay)

p. 14: Psalm 143, Verse 8. Bible: NIV

p. 17: Roll, Jordan, Roll. Negro Spiritual