



Roatch Global Lecture Series on Social Policy and Practice

2004

*Fear Not the Fall:
The Strength of the Human Spirit*

Presented by
Billie Jean Young

April 2, 2004

In Opening



*With gratitude
to Mary Roatch
The present*



The John F. Roatch Endowment was created by gifts made to the university by John and Mary Roatch. The endowment provides support for the Global Lecture Series on Social Policy and Practice, organized through the Office of the John F. Roatch Distinguished Community Service Scholar. We thank Mary for her continued support and her son David for his enthusiastic participation in the endowment's activities.



Celebrating
John F. Roatch's
The memory
Legacy



The University Club of Phoenix

Below:
Billie Jean Young greeting the audience



Dear Friends and Colleagues:

The John F. Roatch Lectures on Social Policy and Practice have become an important part of the ASU scholarly discussions. Through the years, renowned international academics and practitioners have added to the dialogue. In the spirit of our donor, John F. Roatch, they have contributed to the development of a richer and better informed Phoenix community. Our lecturers give generously of their time and knowledge. This year, we were pleased to welcome Billie Jean Young, president of the Southwest Alabama Association of Rural and Minority Women. Billie Jean brought the voices of women of the deep south, contributing a perspective that had up to now been missing.

Billie Jean's performance was a great success. Community leaders, social workers, volunteers and the public heard the voice of Billie Jean Young echoing that of Fannie Lou Hamer. Fannie Lou Hamer was one of the unsung heroines of the Civil Rights Movement and she came alive, once again, through Billie Jean's presentation. This year, we did not need respondents to highlight the local aspects of the message. Poetry and song were part of Billie Jean's armamentarium and they are universal.

In memory of John F. Roatch, and celebrating the ongoing support of Mary Roatch and her son David, a reception was hosted after the lecture. All participants were invited to join the speaker and the Roatch family.

We want to take this opportunity to thank, again, John and Mary Roatch for making all this possible. We also want to express our gratitude to Billie Jean for her generosity and valuable contribution. We are pleased to offer not only the published version of Billie Jean Young's lecture, but also, by kind permission, some of Billie Jean's poetry, adding a graceful final touch to this publication.

Disseminating the ideas presented by our guest lecturers is an important part of the Office of the Distinguished Community Service Scholar and of the College of Extended Education.

With best wishes,

Emilia E. Martinez-Brawley
John F. Roatch Distinguished
Community Service Scholar
College of Extended Education



Above: Receiving flowers and a plaque from Mary Roatch



Above from left to right: At the dinner honoring Billie Jean, Emilia Martinez-Brawley, Mary Roatch, Bette DeGraw and Gus Feather



Above from left to right: A moment at the reception, Jenane Al-Dalal, Billie Jean and Emilia

Billie Jean Young is perhaps best known for her 1983 one-woman dramatization of the life of Fannie Lou Hamer. Her 2004 Roatch lecture draws from a rich background of song, poetry and spirituality. Her voice told not only a story but offered an orchestral background for her words. We are pleased to offer the text of her lecture and some of her poems, which often translate more accurately for the reader the force of the story Billie Jean told. Undoubtedly, the reader will enjoy reading the lecture, perhaps out loud, and being moved by the cadences of the poetry.

– Emilia E. Martinez-Brawley



Billie Jean Young, J.D.

President

Southwest Alabama Association
of Rural and Minority Women

BILLIE JEAN YOUNG is president of the Southwest Alabama Association of Rural and Minority Women. She was the first African American to graduate from Judson College for Women in Marion, Ala., and the second black woman to obtain a law degree from Samford University's Cumberland School of Law. She began her career with the Southwest Alabama Farmer's Cooperative Association, moved on to a position in Washington, D.C., and launched the Southern Rural Women's Network.

Young's play, *This Little Light ...*, is not only a biography of Fannie Lou Hamer, but also a vivid and powerful presentation of the campaign for voter registration in the civil rights movement. Twenty years (and over 600 performances) later, women on four continents have seen the show. After seeing the effect Hamer's story has on people, Young's goal now is to take her message of love and healing to the whole world.

Billie Jean Young has risen above many obstacles that have blocked her way: "you must clear a path,/set sail,/open a hatch,/and walk through it,/or crawl if you have to." Indeed, she has received a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, the Mississippi Governor's Award for Artistic Achievement, Lucy Terry Prince Unsung Heroine Award, and Essence Magazine's Salute to the Decade's Women of Achievement Award. She has recently completed a book of poetry titled *Fear Not the Fall: Poems and a Two-Act Drama*, published by NewSouth Books. She lives in Pennington, Ala., her hometown, and is an adjunct professor at Mississippi State University-Meridian campus.



Above: Billie Jean Young
Left: Emilia Martinez-Brawley, Wayne Mitchell, David Roatch, and Mary Roatch



Above: An attentive audience

Above: A happy meeting at the lecture
Left: The audience's active participation



Below: Donors engage the public



Above: Registration desk



Fear Not the Fall: The Strength of the Human Spirit

*The Fannie Lou Hamer
Legacy of Social Work
and Activism*

April 2, 2004

*Fear not the fall.
Better to fall from the strength
of the sound of one's voice
speaking truth to the people
than to spend a lifetime
mired in discontent,
groveling in the sty of certainty
of acceptance,
of pseudo-love,
of muteness,
and easy-to-be-around-ness.
Better to fall screaming —
arms flailing,
legs askew,
clawing in your intensity
for the right to be —
than silently,
like a weakened snowbird,
sentenced to the boredom of earth
too sick to sing.
— Young, 2004*

I will talk about the power of the human spirit epitomized in Fannie Lou Hamer and her legacy of activism and social work, characterized by indomitable will and tenaciousness. Fannie Lou Hamer has been referred to as a life-sized hero because she inspires us to believe that each of us can cause change, can act from conviction and step out on the promise. Indeed, it was her very ordinariness that allowed people to see themselves more clearly. Her many successes, some of which will be outlined here, give us courage to do likewise. However, in order to fully understand the strength of Fannie Lou Hamer's spirit and her contributions to humanity, we must understand the era in which she lived and, specifically, the conditions imposed on her by her socio-economic position in the Deep South, in the America of the 1960s.

BACKGROUND

*B*orn in 1917 in Montgomery County, Miss., the last of 20 children of Jim and Louella Townsend, Fannie Lou Hamer's early days were spent working in the cotton fields of Mississippi at a time when most Mississippi Delta blacks were rural sharecroppers and cotton was still king.

Owning little land, black farmers worked the land for white plantation owners under the sharecropping arrangement, a system of peonage that replaced slavery. The system worked thusly: the landowner provided what was needed to grow the crop — the land and supplies (like seeds, fertilizer, and insecticides). The black farmers and their families provided labor: planting, tending, chopping, and gathering the crop.

The landowners usually did the accounting, and it is known that most blacks were never able to get out of debt. A cycle of debt, of borrowing money to pay for food and other necessities during the winter months, coupled with the chicanery of landowners and their "cooked" books, effectively kept blacks indebted and unable to realize any profit at all. A common litany of the landowners on accounting day: "Well, John, you almost broke even. Y'all work a little harder next year, and maybe you'll make something."

Blacks usually lived in one of the landowner's shacks reserved for that purpose. Because of their indebtedness to the landowners, which, under the imposed conditions, was virtually perpetual, they could not move on to change their condition. They were "trapped on the huge Delta plantations in Mississippi ... and

toiled from sunup (can see) to sundown (can't see) working for a mere pittance, filling their bosses' pockets with wealth and their lives with leisure." (*Abbott, 1991: 517*)

Picking cotton was Fannie Lou Hamer's first job — at age six — when she was tricked by the landowner into proving how much cotton she could pick. Such was life for Fannie Lou Hamer in her youth. When she grew up and married Perry "Pap" Hamer, also a sharecropper, her adult life followed essentially the same pattern. (*Young, 1989*)

Whites exercised the same level of control over the social and political life of blacks as they did over their economic well-being. Black schools were segregated and unequal. And although the 1954 ruling in *Brown vs. Board of Education* declared segregated schools inherently unequal, major changes in education for blacks were not realized in the Deep South until over a decade later with the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, which Hamer helped engineer. Under the segregated system, black schools were usually presided over by a single teacher who was undereducated, but she was still given the nearly impossible task of teaching at least six grades by herself. Although the schools were segregated, the control exercised by whites over blacks effectively determined the content of education and how much of it black children would receive. This extended to the curriculum, including the choice of textbooks. The schoolhouse was often a fixed-up, abandoned building or church that community people had come together to repair or renovate to create a school for black children. This was true throughout the Deep South.

Plantation culture in the Mississippi Delta made it especially easy for whites to be in control as blacks many times lived in close proximity to the landowners. Unita Blackwell, former mayor of Mayersville, Miss., and a comrade of Hamer's in the Civil Rights Movement who also grew up under the system of sharecropping, confirms this assessment. According to Blackwell: "We couldn't go to school in Mississippi until every scrap of the cotton was gathered. If that meant Christmas, then that's when you could go to school. Not before. Every year, my Mama sent us to Arkansas to my aunt's house to go to school. She would tell the landowner that we were sick and had to go to the doctor over there. That's how my sister and I got a little bit of education, piece by piece." But wasn't the landowner ever suspicious? Blackwell retorts: "No, they were too arrogant to be logical. My Mama did that for years. That man [the plantation owner] never expected resistance so he believed that we were really sick at the same time every year." (*Young, 2000^a*)

Today, it seems like a small act of resistance, but in the context of fear and control experienced by blacks at the time, it was a daring and courageous act, to say the least.

Fear was a constant. You could not even name the fear most times; but it was there, anyway, because black people had few rights that whites were bound to respect. From experience, I can tell you that even if one disagreed with a white person on a factual matter of one's knowing, one would be reminded that whites held sway with the familiar question: "Are you calling me a liar?" There was

no safe answer to the question. Blacks dropped their heads in defeat. Even the youngest whites could demand that a black person address them with titles of respect — Mr., Mrs., Sir, etc. — and order them around at will.

After spending the first 45 years of her life in Mississippi as a sharecropper on a plantation where most of her labor inured her to the benefit of others, Fannie Lou Hamer was a rarity in her time. Mrs. Hamer was married and raising two children with her husband, Pap, and sharecropping on the Marlowe plantation when she decided to register to vote, a little over a month shy of her 45th birthday. She was one of the first to break the shackles of enforced servitude in the Mississippi Delta, and she endured the resulting hardships and punishments of having to flee her home with small children in the middle of the night and being separated from her husband until he could finish his crops and find a new place for them to live.

She had dared to be free by attempting to register to vote, and nothing could stop her, not even the firepower of white, male, Mississippi. On that fateful day in late August, 1962 when Mrs. Hamer went with 17 other blacks to the Sunflower County courthouse to try to register to vote, those with her were struck motionless and dumb with fear. Upon arrival, Mrs. Hamer's group was confronted by a virtual horde of uniformed officers, highway patrolmen and police, their cars ringing the courthouse to prohibit the group from fulfilling its goal of entering the courthouse to register to vote.

One man says that Mrs. Hamer began to sing a freedom song, loudly and urgently, and those around her joined in singing with her. "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round, turn me 'round, turn me 'round. Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round. I'm gonna keep on a-walking, keep on a-talking, marching up the freedom lane!" As the singing continued, Mrs. Hamer stood up and purposefully strode off the bus toward the courthouse, and people began to get up and follow her. That was Fannie Lou Hamer — leading, fearlessly (*Young, 2000^b*). This is the same kind of response to fear we see exemplified in the life of Dr. Martin Luther King when he donned blue jeans, the "uniform" of the poor and marched, facing the snarling police dogs and the billy clubs fearlessly, and went to jail with the poor and downtrodden. It was activism through leadership. Dr. King *knew*,¹ as did Fannie Lou Hamer, and once he knew, the spirit asserted itself and came to the rescue. Like Dr. King, Fannie Lou Hamer shouldered the burden of knowing through active resistance to oppression.

STRENGTH OF SPIRIT

*E*lusive by definition, that which we call the human spirit can be identified, nonetheless in terms of its effect on others. Flesh and blood aside, spirit is present in each and every one of us. How it emerges to make itself known depends much on individual response to stimuli.

When Hamer walked off a plantation cotton row and went to Indianola, Miss., to try to become a registered voter, she was responding to information she had heard in a mass meeting. Student organizers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee had urged local residents to become registered voters. There was something in

¹ "Knew" and "knowing," and other forms of the word, are used throughout the text to denote spiritual enlightenment.

Fannie Lou Hamer was the perfect adherent to the fearlessness that comes from knowing the truth. ... But hers was a political agenda. Mrs. Hamer was by no means hung up on religiosity. She was a Christian, yes. And she used her knowledge of Christianity to hit people with the truth as she saw it.

Mrs. Hamer that responded to that urging even though she had never tried to register before. It made sense to her that if blacks in other places in the U.S. could vote, then "... we ought to be allowed to vote here," she iterated to her husband Pap as she told him her decision the night before. The human spirit is most powerful when it finds its own truth and acts upon it. A good example is Fannie Lou Hamer's response to a sharecropper's demand for her to revoke her decision to become a registered voter or risk eviction from her home: "Well, no, sir, I didn't register for you; I registered for myself." (*Young, 1983*)

That kind of strength wipes out fear. Following truth and its resulting fearlessness allowed her to stand up David-like to the sharecropper's Goliath, with only the might of truth on her side. Somehow, that fearlessness causes the most violent to stop dead in their tracks and oppressors to stand back and rethink their next move.

Fannie Lou Hamer was the perfect adherent to the fearlessness that comes from knowing the truth. She willingly, eagerly even, shouldered the burden of knowing as soon as she knew. Being of the Deep South from what is derisively, though affectionately known as the Bible Belt, she chose a familiar and acceptable medium — scripture — through which to thread her advocacy and organizing work. A consummate realist and avid reader, Mrs. Hamer responded to the evangelical call found in the Bible at Luke 4:18, and considered it her mandate for her work in uplifting herself and the suffering masses in Mississippi. It was her mantra. And she let it be known, reciting it often as she stood before groups of people, neighbors, family, and friends, in mass meetings, exhorting them to join the Civil Rights Movement. A good example is provided in the following excerpt from one of her sermons, delivered in the Mississippi Delta in the late '60s.

*From the fourth chapter of St. Luke, beginning at the 18th verse:
"The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He have sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bound, to preach the acceptable year of our Lord." Now, the time have come that was Christ's purpose on earth, but we've only been getting by paying our way to hell. But the time is out. While Simon of Serene was helping Christ to bear his cross up the hill, he said: "Must Jesus bear this cross alone and all the world go free?" He said: "No, there's a cross for everyone and there's a cross for me. This consecrated cross I'll bear 'til death shall set me free. And then, go home a crown to wear, for there's a crown for me."² (*Abbott, 1991: 523*)*

But hers was a political agenda. Mrs. Hamer was by no means hung up on religiosity. She was a Christian, yes. And she used her knowledge of Christianity to hit people with the truth as she saw it. Indeed, in this sermon, she reminded people that "we've only been getting by paying our way to hell!" and she referred to her work in the Movement as "... since I started to working for Christ." (*Abbott, 1985*) For Mrs. Hamer, there was no separation between her organizing work and her church-going activities. Social work entails making sure that the majority is taken care of, and as citizens and social workers, it is our responsibility to seek out the good of all, what will benefit all. Mrs. Hamer spent her lifetime helping others, poor people, black and white, and women. Once she knew, she continued helping until she was no longer physically able to do so.

Part of Fannie Lou Hamer's success was her egalitarianism. Mrs. Hamer knew that the struggle for civil rights and later, human rights, was not only about her and black people, but about all people, poor people — white and black — women, the disabled and the infirm, and other ethnic groups. She could see that helping the least of these, namely herself and the poor blacks around her, would be beneficial to the whole culture. Just as the positive is true, so too is the negative opposite: racism and prejudice affect everybody and make us all small.

² Stylistically, we have preserved Black English expressions to honor Mrs. Hamer's voice.

Having little else but spirit to depend upon, Fannie Lou Hamer was able to garner the support of others by undaunted will, an unmoving, and therefore, unchallengeable belief in the truth of her cause. Once she knew, there was no turning back for Mrs. Hamer.

FEAR

As I have already described, fear was an everyday component of the lives of black people when Fannie Lou Hamer decided to resist the degradation imposed by sharecropping and peonage on a Mississippi plantation. Fear was a prevailing sentiment when she decided to venture out and try to register to vote.

Mrs. Hamer, however, was undaunted by fear. When she was beaten and jailed in Winona, Mississippi with five other black people who had been demonstrating against segregated eating facilities in bus stations in South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, her response was to become even more firm in her convictions. After reporting to her husband the suffering, the humiliation of being jailed and beaten "... until her skin was hard ... underneath her clothes, until there was no feeling in her body anymore ..." she could come away still firmly convinced that right would make right. She was no longer afraid and could say in earnestness: "You know I can't hate nobody. Can't hate nobody and hope to see God's face. Them people was foaming at the mouth. They sick! I feel sorry for anybody that could let hate wrap them up like that." (*Abbott, 1991: 522*)

Within this climate of fear, Mrs. Hamer had a lot of things going against her personally. She was not only black and poor, she was uneducated and female, and she was venturing into uncharted waters. When she spoke at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, she was a pioneer. It was the first time an unlettered and uneducated person had spoken at that level on behalf of poor people. Not even African-Americans were united in the belief that she should be allowed to speak. And some prominent black politicians felt that Mrs. Hamer's speech, demeanor, dress — in a word, her socio-economic standing and class — made her unsuited to be a spokesperson on such a national scale. Indeed, one of those politicians is said to have voiced the opinion that Hamer's speaking will ... *set us [blacks] back 40 years!* Such was the state of things in Fannie Lou Hamer's personal surroundings.

Nonetheless, she spoke. And so electrifying was her speech, so riveting in her apt descriptions of life under what was essentially American apartheid, so eloquent was she in describing the horrors of being jailed and beaten for trying to exercise basic civil and human rights in Mississippi, that when the President of the United States called a press conference and took the television cameras off her, the press replayed her speech in its entirety twice the next day. Fannie Lou Hamer was fearless in her denunciation of the treatment she had received at the hands of jailers and other law enforcement officials in Mississippi, and in her speech she outlined it in detail (*Hamer, 1964*).

THE HAMER CHALLENGE

So what is our responsibility today? Ensnared in the safety of good homes, working at jobs that are the result of obtaining a decent education in good schools, driving fine cars, what are we to do with the legacy of activism we have inherited from Fannie Lou Hamer? Ostensibly, the things Hamer fought against have changed. What is a social worker to do? Given the times, human rights violations are not so clear today as they were when Mrs. Hamer responded to the burden of knowing, and much of what is wrong in the culture is entwined with other people in other cultures as well as domestically. Nothing seems so simple as the black/white apartheid addressed by Hamer. Indeed, she knew this day was coming.

Fannie Lou Hamer's life, however, calls upon us to step outside our comfort zones and be challenged by the need we see around us. Although the issues are no longer romantic or in-your-face as in Fannie Lou Hamer's day, they are indeed legion and beg the attention of social workers and activists to step forward and, Hamer-like, shoulder the burden of knowing.

In the Deep South, I am called upon to report, many of the conditions she called human rights violations still exist today. Inadequate health care remains a scourge in the Deep South and inner cities of our nation. Babies, children, and the elderly suffer the most. Rural areas continue to be places of medical scarcity in the black belt of Alabama and Georgia and the Mississippi Delta. We are the richest nation on earth, yet the very people Fannie Lou Hamer sought to liberate, continue to suffer — the poor, black and white, and the newly disenfranchised. National policy has made a mockery of health care. Corporations have bought the small hospitals, or they were closed for need of supplemental funding. Corporate-owned regional medical centers in large metropolitan areas purport to serve the poor — but don't. Thus, the basics in primary care are missing.

The dilapidated housing people are forced to live in threatens the health and well-being of these same rural people. Without land and adequate credit, many times occasioned by an inability to pay uninsured medical bills, they are forced to purchase old used trailers to live in. These pieces of personal property are unsafe and unreliable in the turbulent weather and extremes in climate of the Deep South. Old people, whose children have migrated to the urban north or west in search of education and jobs, are many times the most expendable and unnoticed in this scenario.

With the flight of whites to segregated private academies, secondary schools established in the wake of integration, the Deep South has largely abandoned its public schools. Public failure to support efforts to build new schools continues to wreak havoc in the lives of school children as the old schools have become unsafe, deteriorating, and dilapidated. The learning process inside is endangered on an even greater scale with insufficient teaching staff. Concomitantly, many good teachers have fled the system to go elsewhere in search of jobs that pay enough to allow for a decent life. And on and on. It is all a vicious cycle.

Outside the Deep South, we are called upon to look at what flawed policy is doing to our nation as a whole. As social workers, humanitarians, and others concerned with the uplift of humanity, we are called upon to do something.

Outside the Deep South, we are called upon to look at what flawed policy is doing to our nation as a whole. As social workers, humanitarians, and others concerned with the uplift of humanity, we are called upon to do something. How many abused, ignorant, neglected children do we have to come across in our daily work before we begin to understand that something is fundamentally wrong with our culture and with the system that is producing them? How many of the elderly will we watch wandering the streets alone, sick and confused, before we will acknowledge — and shoulder the burden of knowing — that something is fundamentally wrong with the use of resources in our rich country when it comes to taking care of them? What will it take for us to acknowledge that they are the ones who helped to build the wealth we enjoy?

These are only a few of the most pressing issues facing the Deep South and our inner cities. There are other issues that impact all of our people in other ways: What about water policy in the United States, particularly in the Southwest? What about the use of land and natural resources? What about our children's legacy?

Can we honestly say we tried to make the world better? Can we honestly say we shouldered the burden of knowing if we continue to watch human suffering in the United States and around the world without raising our voices in protest? Do we care? Can we sing, like Fannie Lou Hamer? Can we?

*This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine.
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.
— Traditional Hymn, Anonymous
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.*

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Black Beauty

Who? Me?

I just a Black beauty be,
all loose and free,
and trying to be me.



Who? Me?

I just a Black beauty be,
all loose and free
and trying to be me.

Society ladies see me coming,
shake they heads in disgust.

Now the society men,
they something else again.

They see me coming and raise up a fuss.
OOOOOOHHH, weee! Sho nuff!

Counselor sent me to the charm school,
wanted me to learn how to walk and talk.

"Don't bounce up and down,
don't shake when you walk,
Don't open your mouth

keep it closed when you talk."
Who? me? I just a Black beauty be.

All loose and free,
and trying to be me.



Told me lately down at the school,
don't be no fool:
bat your eyes, flutter your lids,
drop your hanky, let the gentlemen bid.

Who? Me?

I just a Black beauty be.

All loose and free, and trying to be me.

Done tried so hard to be Miss Prim,
worked so hard 'til my head hurt.

I can't be Miss Prim
when I be me.

It ain't a part of my real personality.

Who? me? I just a Black beauty be,
All loose and free
and GOTS to be me.



Done tried so hard to be Miss Prim,
worked so hard 'til my head hurt.

I can't be Miss Prim
when I be me.

It ain't a part of my real personality.

Who? me? I just a Black beauty be,
All loose and free
and GOTS to be me.

Hoeing I

Folks always want you to do their hoeing for them.
Even when I was just a little girl

Miss Ellen wanted me to do her hoeing for her.

Wasn't enough that I was her child's playmate,

Wasn't enough that me and Nita played together

every day in the sand building sand castles

Capturing cow ants and fencing them in and

getting stung

Wasn't enough for me to be Nita's friend

Miss Ellen wanted me to be her hoe girl too.

Put a hoe in my hand, yes she did

Every day when it was evening time

when the sun moved out the top of

the sky and lunch was over,

Miss Ellen would call Nita for her nap.

And it was then she put the hoe in my hand.

I started at the age of 7 doing Miss Ellen's hoeing

for her.

And I was too little.

But I hoed anyway 'cause it seemed that's

what I was supposed to do.

It might have gone on forever

But one day Miss Ellen got to feeling guilty I reckon and

fooled around and gave me a quarter.

I rushed home with my shiny new quarter proud as I could be

and Mama allowed as to why Miss Ellen was

giving me money.

And I told her Miss Ellen had me hoeing for her.

Mama didn't say nothing but it was a long time before

I got to see Nita again.

And then she had to come see me

When I came down with the whooping cough.

I still don't know what happened but

The next time Miss Ellen called Nita in for her nap,

She looked at me and said: "And Billie Jean, you

come on inside too, 'cause your mama don't want you

in the sun."

Mama musta got Miss Ellen told!



Mama musta got Miss Ellen told!

I Know You

I know you.

I know you better than you know me,

I started first grade with you.

Oh, you didn't ever see me.

I saw you all the time.



In my Black school that was curiously yours,

I saw you.

Hiding in my first grade reader,

jumping rope, skipping along with Tip,

going uphill to look for water,

and calling yourself Jack and Jill,

Dick and Jane, and Tom and Jerry,

with your crew cut hair and your yellow ponytail,

I saw you.

Coming 'round the mountain when you come,

driving six white horses when you come,

I saw you.

I saw you

jumping out of my filmstrips in my sex education class,

grinning at me from my posters

that told me how to comb my hair,

brush my teeth, and take a bath,

and use a Kleenex when I sneeze.

I saw you.

And I got to know you,

better than I know me,

and better than you know me,

I know you.

I never saw myself.



I know you.

I know you better than you know me,

I started first grade with you.

Oh, you didn't ever see me.

I saw you all the time.

In my Black school that was curiously yours,

I saw you.

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jumping rope, skipping along with Tip,

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and use a Kleenex when I sneeze.

I saw you.

And I got to know you,

better than I know me,

and better than you know me,

I know you.

I never saw myself.

The Child of Too

I go through changes
because of me and who I am
and
and
I am



My skin is always a shade too —
too light,
too dark,
too yellow,
too brown,
too bright,
It is almost never just right

I go through changes
because of me and who I am
and because of you
and who you are.
I am the Child of Too.

My skin is always a shade too —
too light,
too dark,
too yellow,
too brown,
too bright,
It is almost never just right.

My name is too common,
my speech is too informal,
my lips are too thick,
my feet are too big,
my hips are too wide,
But, I am your child.

My name is too common,
my speech is too informal,
my lips are too thick,
my feet are too big,
my hips are too wide,
But, I am your child.

I am the Child of Too,
too much
too little
too late
The Child of Too
I am.



I am the Child of Too,
too much
too little
too late
The Child of Too
I am.
One of you whom I never met.
I make no apologies for you.
I make no apologies for me
for I must go on.

Back there in my past —
dark or light
high or low
narrow or wide —
I can't account for you.
I make the best of me
even with my Too,
And from two too's
I try to make one —
Me!

Back there in my past —
dark or light
high or low
narrow or wide —
I can't account for you.
I make the best of me
even with my Too,
And from two too's
I try to make one —
Me!

Back there in my past —
dark or light
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I can't account for you.
I make the best of me
even with my Too

Mama's Rubboard Hands



Those rubboard
and hoed a row
and planted corn
and sowed ammonium nitrate

Mama washing
rubboard hands
cold December winter days
with deceptively shiny shining suns
cold to the quick.

Mama washing
rubboard hands
moving endlessly up and down
the tin rubboard
over and over
to clean the clothes held tight
in her rubboard hands

firmly
in the cold or lukewarm water
over and over
up and down
the rubboard
move the rubboard hands
of my mama
cleansing other people's clothes
and souls —
the essence of her being.

Making clean
those rubboard hands
in multiple tasks
diverse usings
the same rubboard hands
stiff fingers

on cold days
hurt fingers that still manage to
caress
to hold in her arms
one child
needing holding ... I don't

remember
being held long,

My Mama is, too.

just long enough
and on the right day
at the right time

those rubboard hands
rubbed my head
plaited my hair

picked at my ears
to see if they were being washed
examined my neck
to make sure it's not getting rusty
from neglect,
looked me over
patted me up

and went on to other washboards
at home

underneath the chinaberry tree:
Those washboard, rubboard hands
dished out love
over and over again.

And at night,
those rubboard hands
washed clothes
after seven tin tub baths
starched and ironed white shirts
to boot
with never a cat's face.

Those rubboard hands
pounded out biscuits
myriads of biscuits
in a lifetime
of seven children
and early widowhood.

My Mama's rubboard hands
are magical,
can tease soup from a stone
cook up a stew or pot of greens
that will make you salivate
from the smell alone.

Those rubboard hands
beat cakes out of self-rising flour

and butter
and yard hen's eggs
and was glad to see
Betty Crocker cake mix
which she dutifully beat the 300
strokes it said on the box
with fifty extra for luck thrown in,
in exchange for its predictable sameness.
Our first fast food!

Those rubboard hands picked cotton
and hoed a row,
and planted corn
and sowed ammonium nitrate
around it with her children.

Those rubboard hands were versatile,
sewed many a pinafore dress
out of flour and fertilizer sacks
and from cloth the candy man brought
from faraway places.

Those rubboard hands made
Sunday dresses
with panties to match
and combed many a head of hair
of four girls
especially on Sunday
after church
when widowers came to call,
for dinner and to woo the widow Young.
Those rubboard hands combed hair
until the danger of
any kind of conversation
or proposition(!)
was removed
in front of a child
until the gentleman tire
and take himself home.

Those rubboard hands are awesome.
My Mama is, too.