

“I asked you for your churches, and you turned me down,
But I’ll do my work if I have to do it on the ground.
You will not speak for fear of being heard,
So you crawl in your shell and say, ‘Do not disturb.’”
Joyce Brown—sixteen year old McComb Freedom School student

“For Freedom Summer”

by C. Liegh McInnis

*Oh, I wish I wasn't in this land of killing
old time crimes are not forgotten.
Go away, go away, go away Dixie-Land*

*Oh, I wish I had my freedom, today, today.
In this hellish land I'll take my stand
to vote my way to freedom.*

*Oh, I wish I wasn't in this land of killing
old time crimes are still revealing.
Go away, go away, take yo' ass on Dixie-Land*

Mississippi was a septic tank sweltering with the stank of strange fruit that had been able to mask its immorality with the wardrobe of misinformation and an auxiliary of lynch ropes that choked its citizens into silent submission, but the time had come to strip the state naked to the world and let everyone see its STD of segregation, terror, and death. From inside the beast’s belly freedom farmers had been plowing, trying to raise flowers of justice from a soil soaked with sin. So reinforcements were needed to fly in like crop dusters and cascade a shower of light on the backside of southern debauchery. They were storm chasers riding into the thick of the tornado testing Trailways to ensure that the highway of freedom could be travelled by all but violence was as common as peach cobbler and Sunday morning church services. The southern air was thick with evil; the humidity of hatred could choke an anaconda as it tried continuously to choke the dreams of equality from black bodies. Yet, the ever present shadow of fear had to be faced and suffocated with a love big enough to cover all the adams and all the eves who were willing to climb Jacob’s ladder and wrestle with wrongdoers to reclaim liberty from the vice grips of the wicked.

A radical equation had to be calculated
to show that education + voting = citizenship.
Thus, only through voter registration could people assigned
as fractions be finally counted as whole neighbors,
allowing Ellison’s *Invisible* People to properly slice the
apple pie and carve this dictatorship into democracy.

These pie cutters were an amalgamated artillery aimed at the heart of Jim Crow:
Students Coordinating their own liberation Curriculum,
a Congress founded On Rainbow Equality
a Niagara waterfall flooding the streets with liberty
and Christian feet-washers Leading Southern soldiers—

Four mighty rivers that merged into a COFO ocean
as they went about the work of separating the goats from the sheep,
making sure to prune and pluck any weed with a John Brown complex
so as not to strangle the summer with spoiled seeds that could not
produce a movement of Mississippi Magnolias reaching to sky,
developing Freedom Day that treated voting like Christmas,
allowing black people to give themselves the gift of citizenship.

Yet, Pharaohs and Pharisees rarely relinquish their kingdoms
as Crazy Knight Riders in ghostly getup returned with a vengeance;
one night in May crosses shined like the Las Vegas strip in sixty-four counties
illuminating their four-phase project to exterminate chocolate citizens as
they berated, blackmailed, beat, and bombed black churches and bi-racial buses,
hot flames howling like hungry wolves trying to ravish the vessels of freedom
as the sons and daughters of southern secession served as gatekeepers
holding the doors shut, turning a bus into an oversized oven.
Mississippi had mass murderers masquerading as mayors,
legislators who moonlighted as lynchers, and citizen councils
who provided cloak and dagger cover for bedspread wearing predators.
Even Miss Mississippi discovered that Polar Bears will eat
their own children to feed their bloodlust for supremacy.
1964 flowed with more red than the Redeemers rallying against Reconstruction
as the mountainous murders of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner
represented just a pebble on what was the beach of bodies
buried underneath the lie of southern hospitality,
which was nothing more than the hospitalization of justice.
Democracy was on life-support, and there was a DNR sign hung on the bed
as police cars patrolled like patter-rollers from Picayune to Parchman
lead pipes and lethal legislation created knots and scars on the soul of the south.
Law enforcement was not MIA; it was a beehive of KKK.

Still, a tidal wave of freedom foot soldiers pounded the pavement—
political Picassos painting a better picture for future dreamers,
occupying white only seats with big ole black determination.
There was a blackout to keep green dollars from fertilizing white suppression.
Jail without bail to break the frozen hell of the segregated south—
Free yo' mind and your fears will follow.
There was even a “White Folks Project” ‘cause
they was drownin’ in the mess they made.
Students of the liberation gospel looking for souls to save
going door to door like Jehovah’s Witnesses

knocking down the wall of oppression one brick at a time.
Even as they saw far too many people plucked from the field of life
they continued to walk with the weight of fallen friends on their backs
learning how not to be buried in the avalanche of anger but how to churn grief
and rage into the necessary fuel to plow Mississippi into a garden of goodness.
How do you keep your eye on the prize when
someone is constantly trying to cut off your head?
You become a soaring summer bird with two muscular wings,
a Bible in one hand and a shotgun in the other.
If they don't like the song that we're singing,
hit 'em over the head with this groove from Harmony, Mississippi,
and I know they'll get on the good foot.

But, before they could trample Thompson's Tank together
these silver-spoon children and pot-liquor plantation workers had to forge
a liberation language that could bulldoze the barriers between them,
fighting like red-headed step children behind closed doors
but continuing to punch Mississippi in the mouth with their united fist;
they learned the healing power of hugging each other rather than hating each other,
knowing their mustard-seed faith could change this Mississippi mountain.
From the many mothers' sons slaughtered to keep the steamboat of cheap labor rolling
to the Montgomery County Mother who raised Ruleville revolution,
from Sunflower to Smith County the blood of the righteous
was bold enough to build bodies to break the back of Jim Crow.
Hundreds of homemade heroes turned their houses
into cocoons, sheltering beautiful butterflies and worker bees
before being firebombed for being believers in the salvation of civil rights.
They were a cast-iron conglomerate of college kids and social scholars,
common sense and street smarts, well-endowed degrees and McComb mother wit;
they had lawyers who litigated the racism, ministers who prayed for the racism,
and doctors who provided just the right type of drugs to endure the racism.

And after centuries of being held captive in cancerous curriculums
the children of Kemet needed a Head-Start so
freedom schools erupted to end sharecropper education where
blacks were no longer force-fed the outhouse objectives of others.
Teachers became construction workers using
education as a jackhammer to unbind black brains
from the concrete courses of colonialism,
fostering fresh knowledge to flush the filth of self-hatred
from black minds and provide fertile pedagogy to impregnate
black communities with a Tsunami of self-determinism.
Rather than being a pencil pushing plantation overseer whipping students into slaves,
a freedom school teacher was a farmer who believed in the sweetness of the fruit
and was willing to reach elbow deep into the black soil to cultivate crops
because true education teaches eagles how to fly

and a critical thinker knows how to catch, clean, fry, and sell his own catfish
while community centers became calabash enclaves of
arts and crafts that were used to weave fragmented lives into webs of activism.
The summer project was a mighty machine molding laypeople into leaders,
making Mississippians masters and missionaries of their movement.
It was the must-needed yeast allowing the bread of black Mississippi
to rise to its highest peak no longer confining themselves to the South's toilet bowl.
And from this regenerated soil saturated in sacrifice sprouted
the fearless and forceful forest of the Freedom Democratic Party,
proving that a few trees standing tall before the Devils of Dixie
can raise a harvest full of well-trained warriors that can burst
a Ross Barnett Dam so that we can all finally be baptized in freedom.