

## Derailed

*Black girl, black girl, nigger-in-the-woodpile.*

*That aint me, sir. No sir, that aint me.*

*You say, "sir," girl, and that says it's you.*

*You say sir girl, you say sir girl...* The words slithered around in Lulu-girl's head, until they dripped onto the page, soot-black, and flat as maps. The words were thinner and flatter than the vision she had in her mind, but she could almost see the curves rising around them; the un-hollowing; the arc of meaning. If only she could coax them up.

Lulu dropped her pencil down next to her on the tiny bed. *What was the point of even trying?* She drew her long legs up against her body and wrapped her arms around them. Tight, and closed, and cowardly.

Beneath the pencil and Lulu, a thin blue blanket stretched like a desiccating sea. Lulu-girl and a pencil, floating, floating on a false sea. She shut her eyes and wondered if her heart was also false—this strangely fragile thing residing in the echoing chambers of her suddenly vacuous chest. Fragile, fragile, timid, desolate.

Detroit brooded in the darkness outside. More brooding than the girl in the third-story apartment. More heartsick and lonely than the pimps and hookers rolling down its streets like pinballs.

*Midnight like a black curtain, Lulu thought. Midnight like a train to hell.*

She pulled her head up and stretched her body out. As if an uncurling on the outside could unwind the tightness on the inside.

The words used to flow unchecked, even when she wasn't writing them down anymore. They carved themselves into her brain, and scrolled across the backsides of her eyes, and when she tried to sleep, they were a trembling beneath her skin, and a thumping in between the beats of her heart. The words could eat her alive. She wished they would devour her now, but something else had come along to vie for her passions.

Tomcat.

*Damn him, damn him, damn him.*

Tomcat with his bevy of broads.

Tomcat with his come-hither looks.

Tomcat with all the pussies purrin' for him.

Here was Lulu: a fifteen-year-old girl living in the rundown center of Detroit with an exploding heart for that man—*damn him, damn him, damn him*—who manifested like a vision on that dirty street, in that dazzling night, with those white shirts, and those big...black...beautiful...hands.

She wanted to know why her dreams blew apart just because a pimp on a street said “Hi’ya Lulu-girl,” and the front side of her brain melted away at the sound of his honey-choked voice.

She wanted to know why olive-colored slacks, and button-down shirts, and one gold watch on a coal-black wrist make the demons come out of her and crawl across her skin like flies on a wall.

Why was she no different than anyone else?

Lulu-girl scooted to the edge of the bed and got up. The pencil rolled like a barrel over a blue-blanketed wave.

She crossed the room to a small window. A thin, yellow towel, held in place by clothespins, blocked her view to the outside world. Out there, the heart of Detroit beat like dirty bass through soggy wood: *boom, boom, boom*. She could hear it every minute of every day of her destitute life. And she thought: *give voice to your heart, coward city*.

Lulu-girl drew the towel away from the mildewed window. The window gave back her own reflection—short, afro-frizzed hair pulled away from a lovely face by a white headband. Lovely, lovely, lyrical face with high cheekbones and almond eyes. Too beautiful to be pretty. Too small to sit on such a long neck. Such a long, thin neck for broader-than-average shoulders and gangly limbs.

Lulu switched off her bedroom light. A sliver of the city now revealed itself outside the window. White street lamps lit up yellow pyramids of light on littered sidewalks. Women walked those sidewalks. Celia, in five-inch heels and maroon-flecked hair; Tasha and Heck, with glitter on their eyes and skirts to their sweet spot.

Tomcat walking past the apartment under the greedy glint of Lulu's stare. Hands in his pockets, shirt opened at the neck, muscles rippling beneath his clothes like a tiger in its skin. But not looking up anymore. Not looking up.

Lulu's heart broke again. Always breaking, always breaking, until the fragments of that broken heart filled her throat with an ache she couldn't swallow back down. She put one hand on her neck—her too-long ballerina neck—and let her fingers trace the line of her throat where the pain had lodged itself, until her hand trickled down to her chest and stopped.

*Who was she, that he could beat her down like this?*

Black ballerina?

Natural-born novelist?

Downtown, De-troit whore? (*That aint me, sir; no,sir, that aint me*).

It couldn't be the dancing that made her who she was. Not the dancing that her mama worked two jobs to support—because a girl with brains and potential was a girl who had to be kept off the streets at all costs. No, not that. Not the reading, either, and the good grades, and the hopes her mama piled on her shoulders because no other shoulders could bear them. It wasn't that she was both ghetto and articulate; low-born and highbrow.

No, no; none of these things.

It was the cauldron that was her soul, roiling with a furious heat, battering at her, hissing, “*live, live, live!*” That was her magic. That was her voodoo. That's what made the words spill out of her like lava. And she knew it like a rock knows the river that will polish it.

Everything was different, now, though. The words were gone. Did that mean the fire of her soul was gone, too?

This is how it went down:

She used to sit out on the balcony of her apartment building, like a ghetto queen on a ghastly dais. Oxidized screws bled rust-red rivulets down the support beams, and flecks of broken concrete gathered in dust beneath her bare feet. She sat with her books, and her dreams, and the words running through her head, watching Tomcat from above; an angel looking down on mortal man.

Sometimes, when he would catch her down on the street, he would ask what she was writing, sitting up there on that rickety old balcony. She told him, then, with a trembling and an agony of shyness that made Tomcat grin and sweeten his words.

“Smart and pretty,” he'd say, smooth as silk. “Natural-born novelist. Aint you just *somethin'*, Lulu-girl!”

Oh, he had a power!

Day after day, the same thing, and Lulu never growing tired of it. Like she was waiting for something to happen—and knowing that it would, she didn't mind the waiting.

White contrails streamed across cobalt blue skies. The skies faded into gray muslin while Lulu-girl waited. While Lulu-girl waited and looked—like her eyes were going to start right out of her head. Then one day she did more than look, and one day she did more than talk, and one day she—

Those days of waiting were behind her now.

She had desired him with her fierce resolve. She had desired him with her swollen heart. She had pulled him to herself from those gutters and wished him into her like a demon. *Oh, voodoo child, how you call like a siren of the sea!* And he heard, and he heard, and he heard.

And he came.

Tomcat took her like a leopard taking down a gazelle; violent and efficient. Lulu-girl's tenderness-padded fantasies were replaced by a frantic and raw reality that she memorized in exquisite detail.

A wildness inhabited her; a devil-may-care insolence. She became something she had not been before: a woman; a lover; split-open and alive. Flames licked at her loins every time she thought of him. A fire like that could burn you to ashes.

She knew.

And then the day came—that day, that day, that day—when it was “put out, or put up,” and “show me the gold, or hit the road,” and her heart crumbled into a void of disintegrated hope. She learned that to be split-open was to be vulnerable. Cruel tormentor of a man. So beautiful and so wicked.

The pain roared, and spit, and heaved. And so did Lulu-girl. Every morning for six weeks straight. Grief, digging into her, pulling her apart from the inside out. Grief for what was lost. The dream. The fantasy. The non-reality she named “love”—that cut her throat and left her to die.

Grief, too, for what she had gained, that she had not wanted.

A grief like that should kill a person. That it didn’t was a surprise to Lulu. And then it was a disappointment. And then she decided to forget who she was because it was easier than mourning the loss. But forgetting was hard, too. Her life pulled at her like quicksand; the harder she struggled, the deeper she sank.

*Boom, boom, boom.* No rest for the wicked.

Courage doesn’t die easy. The alarms in Lulu-girl’s head were soft, at first, like the chime of an old clock. The sound made her cry, like something in her heart had burst. Then they came like the incessant bleating of a sheep that finally lulled her to sleep at night when sleep was so hard to come by. And, finally, a shrill, wild ringing that unstuck the tendrils entwined in her brain and forced them back—with a snap—from the hell they had grown up from.

Lulu-girl forget? *Forget?*

This was Lulu now: searching the corners of her soul for a remnant of that lost thing and trying to remember a side of her that was once brave and alive. It brought her back to her notebooks, though they felt foreign in her hands, and her thoughts clicked out slowly like rusted gearing.

She would remember. She *had* to remember.

She turned away from the window and walked back to her bed with a dignity she did not feel. *That’s how you do it.* Two little steps in this dinky room. She should have danced those

steps. She knew it. Something awakened in her. Could just the *knowing* have a power to it? Even without the feeling?

She sat down on the bed. The room and the apartment were silent around her. Detroit still beat out a hollow, muffled rhythm. *Cowardly?* In a flash, she knew she had this city wrong. She pictured herself as a goddess rising above it, held up by its resolute heart—a three-story tall ebony statue spewing yellow sunlight from her eyes and the spaces between her teeth. A caricature. A created thing. A model of courage that pushed against the sky and remembered heaven. *That's how you do it.*

Tomcat was one thing. Lulu-girl, now; she was something else.

At last, the faucet moaned and groaned in dry pipes, and seeped out a slow dribble of life-giving water. Too late for some things; just in time for others.

The lights were still off in her bedroom, and outside Detroit spun a vortex of radiance and disintegration. Somewhere down below, Tomcat schemed new ways to suck in the wanderers, but Lulu-girl wasn't one of them. She burnt through his wickedness like Holy Ghost fire. *Oh Lord, like Pentecostal Holy Ghost fire!* He knew when to wash his hands of a bad, bad thing.

Lulu-girl switched on a small lamp by her bed, creating a weak circle of illumination, and then she flung open her notebook and gripped the pencil in her hand. She waited, as if in suspended animation; something inside her vibrated like the energy between molecules.

*Ruin, mortal, agony*

She wrote the words down.

*Rejection, destruction, desecration*

More words—more, more, more....

*Breaking, rising, roaring*

*Delight, desire, despair, divinity, design, dare, dare, dare!*

The cold stones in Lulu's body cracked open. Something glittered there; something unexpected, and hot, and brave.

Lulu stood up again. All the way up, on the tips of her toes. All the way on pointe. Like she had learned over months and years of practice in a ballet school for black girls, in the rundown center of Detroit, when her mama couldn't pay the gas bill, but she could buy pointe shoes. By habit, by instinct, her long arms rounded up above her, her head turned, her body arched, her neck stretched, her peripheral vision seeing the graceful, elongated pose of her narrow, slender hands. So much practice and perseverance—so much *strength*—to master these poses. Marvelous what a brain could train a body to do.

Just between her hip bones, where her body used to dip inward, a subtle bump altered her silhouette.

Lulu knew it was there. She knew, and she knew, and she knew.

At first, it was going to take her out, break her down, kill her dead just as soon as she had to tell Mama. Into her thoughts seeped every hope the poor woman would have to surrender:

“Goodbye, college for my black girl.”

“Goodbye, gettin' out of Detroit.”

“Goodbye, ‘my baby’s gonna have a different life than I have.’”

“Goodbye, hope, escape, redemption, resurrection.”

*You let your ass get derailed!*

But Mama didn't know Lulu-girl like Lulu was coming to know herself. Mama didn't know that when walls were put up in Lulu's heart, Lulu knew how to break them down. She

would burst out of her skin if she had to, and burn herself down. Down, down, down until all that burning, for Lulu, was like steel being forged.

Detroit could do that for a person.

Lulu could feel it now, as if a fire had been kindled in her belly. What came out raged like dragon's breath; like a fire demon. Focused and smoldering, it spat at specters circling Lulu. It roared at doubts clawing her throat. Then the words came—in her own voice—spilling like molten lava; burning, burning, burning; razing the alter-ego of her consciousness that tried to convince her of her own ruin:

*No, you Voodoo witch,*

*No, you evil, black bitch.*

*No, ma'am; no, ma'am,*

*I know who I am!*

Lulu-girl dropped out of her ballet pose with a flourish and spun across the room to her window. She ripped the ragged yellow towel from its clothespins and threw it on the floor. Pinpoints of light, like distant constellations, flung themselves out into the darkness as far as she could see. Behind her, the small lamp lit the room faintly. Her heart pounded out a mixed beat of courage and fear: *boom, boom, boom.*

Anyone looking up would have seen a silhouetted figure—elongated by shadow and slightly larger than life—peering down on the ghetto street like a luminous god.