

SALEEM HUE PENNY

Fall 1994

To Whom It May Concern,

I am grateful that my three children are thriving and flourishing at Heathwood Hall Episcopal School. The opportunity to attend your School has changed our lives. However, with the new dress code requirements it is difficult to buy polo shirts, khaki pants, a pair of brown shoes, and a pair of black shoes for three children, since we are not wealthy. I am resourceful and do most of our clothing shopping at thrift stores.

My pastor's wife distributed black and white flyers for discount purchases from the Children's Exchange clothing swap last Sunday. Unfortunately, I was unable to get enough clothes for my children to last them the full year it seems the word has caught on about the sale. Especially in this recession, everyone loves a bargain, even if they don't need it. I am writing to humbly ask for clothing assistance. Especially since they are each one of a handful of Black students in their respective grades, I am worried they will stick out.

I want them to feel confident and secure. After recently stealing the gym uniform of my son, who is not the fastest, but is a kind, fair team player, a classmate then urinated on it. I appreciate Assistant Coach Williams swiftly replacing the shirt and shorts. However, it is disheartening that so many bystanders remained silent and only after two days of the class losing recess privileges did a student finally come forward. Head Coach Taylor allowed the student to remain anonymous. Avoiding additional embarrassment was a priority so gym staff declined to inform the student's parents.

Please consider my request for clothing assistance so my children (who take pride in their appearance) will be in compliance with the dress code. Your support will allow me to meet the basic needs of my family. I hope this letter finds you well.

*Sincerely,
Ms. Olethea Penny*

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Then again, all things ((being equal))

*after Jasper “Ninn” Washington (1937–2005)
& Stacy “Tire Man” Washington (1975–2021)*

a quarter mile behind/ they see the popeye of the Cressida wagon’s dusty
tail light/ barreling
down the road/ track rods shot, power steering grunts/ now, maybe one
quarter of a mile, then she’ll cut
the wheel hard/ clear the eroding culvert pipe, pull onto
the side yard grass—that one perennially scorched
diagonal patch/ *let’s move cuzzo, they back early from the store/
c’mon, push it, y’all—turbo boost time!/
big league chew spit out/ like mike, rookie tongues out/
making whooshing sounds to go fast/
& faster/ still, like*

*momma’ n’them gone whup us/—make us hold still
like—/ i don’t wanna pick my own switch/
dire reminders signal muscle reserves fire/ we spin
our pedals/ like egg beater/ like cotton gin/ like*

*don’t say nothing, better keep on stirring/ you little boys weren’t too tired to steal
off to Mr Joe’s for candy? —no— so you better
buck up, quit looking at me with them puppy dog eyes/
these beans ain’t magic & caint shuck themselves,
& you ain’t Jack . . .*

so they yes ma’am’ed/ stayed on task for/ almost a minute and a half/
hours await/ summer sadness blossoms
from the bottomlessness of their buckets/
competing with cicadas screeching across the creek/ their gaze keeps
drifting/ something summoning them to go/ back

down the road/ see if auntie's mailbox really did
get baseball-batted-in last night/
the family used to all be here . . . / but again & again, kin
keep going down the road/ (pulled, tugged, yanked, who knows?)/

the unspoken we cannot hold: how last week, those crackers
chased Uncle Jasper straight into that hairpin/ bald wheels too old to
grip/ too broke for anti-lock brakes, so he just went
into the ditch/—(this the script
the adults voted to tell the kids)/—
the string bean boys slide their buckets close, lean in like, *you think
the grownups lying?* they smirked, like, *of course*

they think we dumb/ or they think they slick?
. . . your uncle was just driving too fast &
fishtailed/ he must have forgot to downshift/ & dropped straight
down to third gear/ that's all we know— y'all saw the tire tracks . . . /
the kids argue about how many of his tires left
the ground & when his truck hit
the tree, they reckon he had done, been, got, *free/ because, see,
yeah-yeah/ because, he pushed hisself up off the steering
wheel & stretched hisself out real flat, like pancake-flat
& slid hisself out through the little window between the seats,
fresh out the back, flap
jacked off the tailgate . . . /*

& now the adults start wondering if/ maybe, like . . . he *was* smiling
as the buckshot ricocheted off his chassis/ hollering
"may the clouds rain blood red upon you forevermore"/ & yeah, maybe,
like/

you reckon he circled over the field by mama's house?/
headed toward Cousin Frank n'them's place?/
pausing right quick above the propane tank/ kitchen-side of the church/
where big kids made mischief (&
little sisters Judas'ed on them)/ maybe through his busted lip, holy grin
"well, Jesus, i can't say for sure if i'll see you around. . . /"
he bottle-rocketed

fast/ & faster/ still like/ grandmomma'n'them gone whup'up
 on him/ if he come home late again/ so he spun his
 fresh-from-the-pawn-shop halo,
 like pedals/ like egg beater/ like cotton gin/ kicked hard/
 & harder/ still like/ even up there, somehow he still
 wind up fighting a jetstream/ something he can't/ see

 we live life hoping the next will be

better/ just a little less struggle than down here/ just grant us
 a little mercy: hot sauce, lucky dice, an extra
 white lily biscuit to sop up this red-eye gravy/ granddaddy'n'them
 didn't want much/ just to age with diligence
 & grace/ be deacon, if not pastor

Black/ & church lady funeral hat Black/ & good suit Black/ & old
 shoes be brand new after a shoe shine Black/ & never
 crack Black/ & every shut eye ain't sleep Black/ & never let them
 see you sweat Black/ & baby Black &
 daddy never came back Black/ & better talk white & keep that
 good job Black/

& *still* never cracked Black/ behold:

cardboard-backed regality quilting uninsulated plywood walls:
 afros, jheri curls,
 lace front weaves,
 dreadlocks/
 high & tight/
 chisholmed shirley cards/

a rainbow of Lowcountry Black Folk:
 poised in Greenbax stamp picture frames/ & \—but, crack came
 back white/ & Black Jesus Christ,
 auntie's first born son got his third strike—but/ *shhhh . . .*
Black, don't tell grandmomma'n'them we saved
you a plate/
yellow pound cake,
wrapped in the chest freezer— just stay safe... /

