WHO'S YOUR DADDY
Arisa White
Arisa White channels the ear of Zora Neal Hurston, the tongue of Toni Cade Bambara, and the eye of Alice Walker in the wondrous Who’s Your Daddy. She channels Guyanese proverbs, Shango dreams, games of hide and seek, and memories of an absentee father to shape the spiritual condition. What she makes is “a maze that bobs and weaves a new style whenever there’s a demand to love.” What she gives us are archives, allegories, and wholly new songs.

—Terrance Hayes, American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassins

“...absence breeds madness, an irreconcilable relationship you know is there but can’t call it by its name...”

In these crisply narrative poems, which unrel like heart-wrenching fragments of film, Arisa White not only names that gaping chasm between father and daughter, but graces it with its true and terrible face. Every little colored girl who has craved the constant of her father’s gaze will recognize this quest, which the poet undertakes with lyric that is tender and unerring.

—Patricia Smith, Incendiary Art

Somewhere nearing its end, Arisa White says of Who’s Your Daddy, it’s “a portrait of absence and presence, a story, a tale, told in patchwork fashion...” This exactly says what Who’s Your Daddy is, though it doesn’t say all it takes to do justice to the mythic paradox an absent parent guarantees a child, young or grown, or what it takes to live with and undergo such birthright. There’s not only a father’s absence and presence, there’s a mother who says “you raise your daughters, and love your sons,” there are stepfathers, uncles, aunts, cousins, a grandmother, brothers, lovers, all of whom leave their marks and give and take love. Surrounding the whole book hovers the questions do I forgive him, and is forgiveness possible? This beautifully, honestly conceived genius of a book shook me to the core. —Dara Wier, You Good Thing

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How does a lyric memoir—a queered-up autobiographical hybrid of prose and poetry—become a real page-turner? Well, for one thing, its speaker uses her authenticity and open-heartedness to generate a rib-cracking amount of courage to look for, find, and emotionally confront a missing Guyanese father who ends up being the “unhello” of a “nevermind.” What’s so moving about this discovery is the speaker’s lyric response. It’s a shrug that’s a song that’s the speaker telling it experimentally-straight about how it feels to have “arms free of fathers.” It’s a story that’s a song that’s the speaker’s “gangster swagger” that beautifully tells of how to confront one’s relation to “a culture of deadbeats, wannabes, has-beens, what-ifs, [and] can’t-shows” without succumbing to despair. One really wants to quote Plath’s line here about “eat[ing] men like air.” Oh, I love the courage of this book. The whole “black heart” and love-strength of it. And you will too!

—Adrian Blevins, Appalachians Run Amok

A lyric anthem for the fatherless, for seekers of the places and people that made us, for the artists ready to unearth and reshape their own stories. I gulped this exquisite manual like precious medicine, a spell that made me more myself.

—Melissa Febos, Abandon Me

Collaborative, interactive, this work of poetry and memoir offers life as a recurring question. Who’s Your Daddy is a study of how power and loss work on the intimate scales of daily living and queer loving. Read this with compassion for your own defining questions and the raw texture they have left upon your heart.

—Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Dub: Finding Ceremony
Who’s Your Daddy is striking and gorgeous. “I’m born into a bracket of boys,” White writes, framing a portrait of fatherhood that shutters and aches; it enthralls. I wanted to lap it up. A reflection on family that permeates via knitted prose with deep verse—my favorite kind. White’s work is sonic, lyric, and important. I can’t wait for y’all to read this book. —Emerson Whitney, Heaven
Also by Arisa White

You’re the Most Beautiful Thing that Happened
A Penny Saved
Harrah’s Nest
Black Pearl

With Laura Atkins, Illustrated by Laura Freeman

Biddy Mason Speaks Up

WHO’S YOUR DADDY Arisa White

Augury Books • New York
This is a grandfather feeling: Hear these walls convert into a perpetual bloom of cherry blossoms. Petals as understudies for tears in constant descent when repressed grief climbs up my mother’s chest. The grief is her father’s shape. She never heard his “I love you.” Cheated with a white woman, gambled away and didn’t pay taxes on the family house, his bags brimmed with hurt shirts and broken trousers.

My mother’s petals: “Dad, remember you used to take me to the bar.”

My mother’s petals: “In return, all the men I lust, I let break me.”

My mother’s petals: “It’s difficult to say ‘I love you.’”

I move at the durational speed of this grief-water, a rhythm that suits The Running Man.
I.

“Blood follows the veins.”
—Guyanese proverb
My mother is nineteen when she meets Gerald. Handsome, tall, good healthy teeth, dressed sharp and debonair, he could steal the room. She felt lucky he chose her. Ten years her senior and she smiles, mostly to herself, remembering him teaching her how to drive. All the places she goes. In his Cadillac down Fulton Street, down Nostrand Ave, without question up and down Atlantic and Pacific, DeKalb, on Eastern Parkway, through Gates and Myrtle, Bushwick and Halsey, sunsets on Jay. Down this first day of spring, red lights every two minutes when contractions start. The cab ride stretches out before the hospital. I am her second child. She has calm nerves, clear expectations, controlled breath. An easy birth. And what she negotiated with Gerald, a married man, about his role in my care—definitely included a one-way street.
I feel for the father, for a feeling of father, I send out a cry, I am up when I hear my uncle come through the door of the family house, with the cherry tree out front, past midnight, he walks up the stairs, then down the stairs, and I’m the rock-a-bye baby in his arms.

At a time opened to the mythical world, he dishes out Chinese takeout. I suck the knuckle of an almost-eaten chicken bone. The fried rice glistens from two packets of duck sauce. My uncle makes sure each grain leaves me fed. When wee hours nod me out, I am in his Tree of Heaven arms and the cradle never falls into whole dead sounds or, thankfully, nothing at all.

I’m born into a bracket of boys. Five years before and five years after. There I stand in the middle of my cousins and oldest brother, all with the same middle name—Corey—as sisters are wont to do when they know they are having boys at similar times. Unite them in names as my brother and I bear maternal White. We’re posing on somebody’s stoop. It’s summer and it looks so very eighties, the boys in runner’s shorts with white piping, tube socks pulled up to kneecaps, three colored stripes at the top. Seven variations of short afros, and each one of them rocking Adidas or Chuck Taylors. Ice cream truck singing its jingle in the background of this photo, laughter and shit talking no doubt. A block party with classic R&B tunes like “We Are Family.” The boys, staring off in different directions, and I’m cheesing at the camera.
A SWAT team raids our Florida apartment and the fact that I remember startles my mother to this day. I am three. We just moved in and there is no furniture. All bare and white walls. Officers kick in doors, slam open, knock down, tear shit off. An automatic gun points at me. My eyes on that black metal cheerio. We’re commanded not to move, but what move can we not make? Even this stillness we moved ourselves to do. I hold my bowels until officers evacuate our home with all our men in handcuffs. My stepfather Bing is the last one out. I leave my mother and baby brother sitting on the living room floor with Jackie, Vicki, Linda and their kids. I approach a crater where the bathroom knob hit against the wall, the door’s ajar. An officer’s footprint stamps in the fear of them coming back—his voice still booming, “Next time we’ll take your children away”—and I go never mind. At four years old, I hide behind the door to the bedroom I shared with my siblings. Painted royal blue and I see all the ways my cousin was too heavy with the paint. We are living in a two-bedroom apartment on Fulton Street in Brooklyn.

Gerald comes for a visit, which will be his last, and it is just me and my mother in the apartment. The place is clean. Frankincense burning, Pine-Sol-mopped floors, and this royal blue I’ve cornered myself in—maybe Gerald will not find me here.

He doesn’t know the floor plan, how I find comfort in closets, in corners where I do not punish myself but pray. Pray where I am the quietest conversation with myself.

But Gerald finds me. Calling my name lures me from believing I am an island. Pulls me across waters so indigo there is no bottom. Welcomes me on a shore that slips and slips from under me until my feet trust again.

I hear him loud and clear:

“Why you runnin from me?
I am your father.”

My feet resign.

Father isn’t a place from which I can run.
Some mornings Bing takes an interest in my life, in my schooling, and wants me to perform my tricks. “Say your ABCs” is this morning’s request. I start off perfect and then LMNOP, which I recite as a jumble of sound, makes my stepfather furious.

His Guyanese accent always created distance in me, between us. Instantly in sound we’re foreign to each other and I have to tune myself sharper to catch him. His tone and those “eh, eh, ehs” schupsing like a rock skip, skip, skipping then striking my forehead.

Over his dreadlocks, King Selassie looks right past me. Everyone at the table, mother too, my brother just a toddler, but his stare observes tensions, my pulling away. I don’t want to be there. Bing seeing me for letters I cannot produce.

I begin again, arriving sloppily at LMNOP, and for the third time, I refuse to go past C. My body refuses. My tongue is tied. It is not safe here. I can’t understand the mountain in his voice. Why deny me Farina and lemongrass tea? Why am I a Stupid, stupid girl?

Those bangles were Guyanese gold, my mother recollects. Still bothered that I, as a first grader, ignore her instructions not to take them off, and set the pair of bangles inside my desk. Each chime, my teacher stops dead in her writing on the blackboard or looks up from her desk to notice me. Her look turns me red-handed. Each time I move, this bright gold jingle undermines the control she has over us. Our silence is a sign of obedience and respect. She is known for being a disciplinarian: quick to lessen you with an outdated insult like Don’t be a bump on a log. Or stupid is as stupid does. Or outright pops you on the back of your head with her pencil. Or gets in your face and yells herself flush. Because nobody needs such noise, I toss the bangles in a trash pile on our way to the cafeteria. When I come home, wrists free, I tell my mother, “They fell off.”
“What is wrong with you?” My mother wants to know. She carries me into the 79th Precinct. I was testing how far I could click in the handcuffs without them locking. Going for the thrill of escaping by the skin of my teeth. I was successful before, but when they locked, they were tight around my ankles. Shuffled and hopped and the bobby pin or fork or Philips head couldn’t do the job. The metal dug to my bones.

She lifts me onto the front desk, three tiers high, and the officer asks, “How did she access an official pair of NYPD-issued handcuffs?” My mother kept them in the dresser’s top drawer—my older brother said she and Bing got freaky with these. So her response is a lie, a whole lie, and nothing but a lie, and we aren’t freed from the officer’s judgment.

I got on a sunshine yellow tank top in the second grade, and by midday, a kid’s footprint is an emblem on my chest. I threw a chair first. It misses his head by this-much. He says, having seen me in C-Town paying with food stamps, I’m on welfare because I have no daddy. Now everyone is laughing at me. For something I have no control over. For the love that commits my mother to my care. He has no idea who I am. My punishment “for starting the fight, young lady” is to sit in front of the classroom with my desk to the board and practice my cursive. The word is “ship.” I write it on slant, the “p” becomes “t,” and I’m spelling “shit”—five times for muscle memory.

The red ballpoint draws my attention, correct these ‘ships.
“Gerald gave you your first and middle names.” My mother shares this with me each time I ask about its meaning. Especially the first name others insert an additional “s” into and pronounce me wrong. Who is this Arisa without a souvenir mug or key chain?

“He came up with it.” She speaks into my hair as she parts and combs it. “I wanted to name you Melissa.”

Not what I need to complete my homework assignment—this disappointment in her. Every Melissa I knew was Puerto Rican and was, at some point, sent home from school for having lice. This is the first time I am grateful for my father. I ask her again.

She divines its meaning and I feel her body pause:

“Precious Jewels.”

Third grade ended and summer vacation started three days ago. My oldest brother says I keep saying his name over and over again. I think back on that overcast June morning when the car hits me, I can’t remember my voice coming out. My brother says, my orange goes up and falls down in slow motion. Briefly, a crystalline thread connects my left eye with the right eye of the driver. We give permission to fear. There is dampened darkness that leads a procession of filmic clips: EMT cuts my aquamarine Jordache stirrups. Neighbors seeing me—that boy from the fourth floor we sometimes played with. The woman from the sixth, always with a headscarf, who looks like the actress Lynn Thigpen. All of them in states of O. The chill cubic containment of the ambulance. My mother’s face blanched with worry, all her color recedes so she can be stoic. Bing, deep umber with tears. Dreadlocks stuffed tall in a knitted cap, he looks Seussian. His one-winged questions “Is she OK? Is she OK? She OK? She OK?” fall like manly snowflakes to muffle beeps, sirens, tires on speed, and all our panic making angels in the snow.
We can’t have nice things, and somehow we, the children, are to blame. We live mismatched. Stuff rarely organized. Stuff thrown in plastic bins, large tote bags. The dressers are hand-me-downs handed down. The wood rails, nubs and dust. The bottom of the drawers fell out. The closet doors are off the tracks. There are no hangers to hang things. No shoe racks for all our shoes. No privacy, either, since Bing ripped the bedroom door from its hinges to remind us we are spectacle. And it was five of us—one adult (sometimes two) and four kids, living stylish in a two-bedroom apartment.

I want things to have a place where they can be easily found, instead of rummaging through the “sock bag” to find the match. Or in that garbage bag in the back of the closet. Or someone is wearing the only belt that goes with my outfit. I start sleeping with my clothes, school uniform, and accessories folded at the end of my bed. I need a clear demarcation between what is mine and what is yours.

When my mother tells us we are moving to a larger apartment—three bedrooms in a duplex and my oldest brother decided to live with Granny—I figure more space would mean nice things. But Cornell is moving in with us.

When I see my new bedroom, the rainbow wallpaper my mother and him hung up, the center panel is upside down. The rainbow is wrung and breathless. My headboard jangles and my sister’s bed—we all know she is prone to bouncing and heavy-bodied—collapses by the second week.

The mechanic has no sense for fixing things, except for cars and me interfering on him beating my mother. For which he rips the poorly assembled headboard from its screw holes and threatens to “Fix me proper.” My mother stands there exhausted, and my vulnerability is confirmed.

I pay a fee to the male for my passage through this doorway—enter as girl, leave as other.
Notes

Page 9: Prologue: dialogue composed from Denise White's letter addressed to her father, "Dear Dad/Dennis."


Texts of Influence

Dillard, Cynthia B. Learning to (Re)member the Things We’ve Learned to Forget: Endarkened Feminisms, Spirituality, and the Sacred Nature of Research and Teaching. New York: Peter Lang Inc., 2012.


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About the Author

Arisa White is a Cave Canem fellow and the author of the full-length poetry collections You’re the Most Beautiful Thing That Happened, A Penny Saved, and Hurrah’s Nest. Her poetry has been nominated for a Lambda Literary Award, NAACP Image Award, California Book Award, and Wheatley Book Award. The chapbook “Fish Walking” & Other Bedtime Stories for My Wife won the inaugural Per Diem Poetry Prize. She’s the coauthor of Biddy Mason Speaks Up, winner of the Maine Literary Book Award for Young People’s Literature and the Nautilus Book Award Gold Medal for Middle-Grade Nonfiction. As the creator of the Beautiful Things Project, Arisa curates poetic collaborations that center narratives of queer people of color. She serves on the board of directors for Foglifter and Nomadic Press and is an assistant professor of creative writing at Colby College. Find her at arisawhite.com.