

A poet's truth at the graveside

At the interment, the holy words I needed to hear weren't from the Bible.

by [Yolanda Pierce](#) in the [October 2023](#) issue

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Century illustration

Our paths crossed in a graduate seminar room far above Cayuga's waters in upstate New York, with tentative conversations about home, which we both deeply missed. I was a mere five-hour drive from home, while he was two flights away. But we both felt far away from those we loved and the communities that had given us life. We immediately became thick as thieves, and I'm sure that those who watched our

friendship blossom wondered what a White boy from rural Alabama and a Black girl from inner city Brooklyn had in common.

As it turns out, we had so many things in common. While Jake Adam York was a budding poet, writing about his grandparents' era, I was a budding theologian, trying to figure out my grandparents' religion. We talked race, religion, history, sweet tea, buttermilk biscuits, and the lack of good barbecue. I remember a few trips in search of southern cuisine, as well as a hilarious road trip to a rap concert in Syracuse.

After graduate school, I followed Jake's career from afar. His meteoric rise as a star in American poetry wasn't unexpected, as I had heard his poems before they were poems, workshopped in the classroom. And I had begun writing theology for both academic and public audiences, some of which he had read and critiqued. In both our work, we were drawn to historical periods that we had not experienced, to events we hadn't lived through and could only know through the whispers of our ancestral muses. I envied his success and his brilliance. Only once after graduate school did I have a chance to hear him read in public, after the publication of his second book of poems. I knew I was witnessing an extraordinary voice in American literature and that I had been privileged to sit with him in a classroom and learn alongside him.

Jake's death in 2012 left me bewildered. The news, delivered by another classmate, was incomprehensible because of his young age—he was 40—and how completely unexpected it felt to all of us. Our careers had barely begun. I knew he had more stories to tell, more poems to write, more history to reimagine. The death of a classmate, someone you meet when you are young and the future stretches endlessly before you, forces you into a mode of introspection. You grieve not only for the loss of someone you knew but for the things left undone, unwritten, untried, untested, and unexperienced in your own life. You wonder: Which of your own words, stories, and poems will live beyond you? How will you be remembered? And with death always lurking so close and so unexpectedly, how can one live to the fullest knowing that tomorrow is not promised?

These thoughts about life and death, loss and premature grief, were present with me this summer, 11 years later, at an interment service for a beloved family member. I was angry that the day was sunny and beautiful, with clear skies and a warm breeze. How dare the weather not reflect the fact that we were gathered to commit the body of a loved one to the grave and to eternity? I wanted torrential rain and the

darkest of skies, bolts of lightning and thunder, to adequately reflect the somber occasion. How dare the natural world fail to acknowledge our pain and our loss? The usual clichés from well-meaning friends added to my grief: words about the long life my family member lived and phrases about God's timing and God's plan. None of this helps when you are knee-deep in sorrow.

I stood to speak at the graveside of my elder, an African American man born and raised in rural North Carolina during the era of Jim Crow, someone who had known personally the ills of segregation and the horrors of lynching. And I found myself quoting the words of my former classmate and poet who died at 40, in tribute to a man who lived into his 90s: "think of all the hands and mouths / and breaths of air that sharpened / this flavor and handed it down to us."

After a few more words, I took my seat—and for the first time, I felt God's presence with me, with us all, in that cemetery on that beautiful summer day. The words my heart needed to hear weren't from the sacred texts of the Bible, but they were holy words all the same. A poet's truth telling reminded me that I had been bequeathed a legacy of faith, through the hands and mouths of my elders and ancestors. Even after the breath left their bodies, I had a rich inheritance of their stories, their songs, their words, and their wisdom. And the ancestral cloud of witnesses is a life-sustaining force in the midst of grief.

As all the mourners returned to our cars, I remained conscious of the grief-shaped hole in my heart. Everyone who has experienced loss knows that the hole never goes away but is simply reshaped in time. But I actually welcomed the warmth of the sun and the beauty of the day. I didn't feel nearly as angry about the clear skies and picture-perfect weather. The trees and the grass and the breeze felt like gifts, like the gift of a poem that reminds you that you are not alone and that love can continue beyond the grave.