



WALKING TESTIMONIES

RICHMOND IS HOME

Poems by Ciera-Jevae Gordon

*Campbell, an employee of Neitha's Real Estate poses with the
brick thrown through the office window when Wilbur Gary, a Black
Richmond resident, was in the process of purchasing a home in a white
neighborhood.¹*
Photo: Richmond Independent, March 4, 1952

NEITHA'S REAL ESTATE OFFICE

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Poems written from interviews by
Ciera-Jevae Gordon

Edited and designed by
Evan Bissell

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About the Collection

The following poems are created from interviews of current and former Richmond residents about housing and belonging. The interviews were conducted by the author between June and September, 2017. The age of the interviewees ranges from 24 to 70. Seven interviewees are Black, one is Latinx, six are women, two are men. Three interviewees were displaced from Richmond, two are formerly incarcerated. All but one are currently renters. All of them are incredible people working to make home.

The poems are organized according to the age of the interviewee, with the youngest interviewee last. The prologue is based on the history of the Gary family, a Black family that faced white mob violence when they moved into a white Richmond neighborhood (Rollingwood) in 1952. The poem is based on research about the Gary family story by Jovanka Beckles and Richard Rothstein.

The collection was created as part of Staying Power, a six-month arts and participatory action research fellowship focused on housing and belonging in Richmond, California. Through weekly workshops that engaged art, research, and policy, the six fellows designed a set of creative and policy outcomes that support a stronger housing environment for those most in need of stable, quality housing in Richmond. Other outcomes include a “know-your-rights” mural, research, and writing on policies that support low-income residents, writing workshops in an affordable housing site, a video, and public poetry performances, including at Richmond City Council. For more on Staying Power, see: haasinstitute.berkeley.edu/stayingpower

Participating organizations were the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment, the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society, RYSE Youth Center, and Safe Return Project. The 2017 Staying Power fellows were William Edwards, DeAndre Evans, Ciera-Jevae Gordon, Sasha Graham, Noe Gudino, and Satina Shaw, and was coordinated by Evan Bissell. Special thanks to Isa Nakazawa and Natasha Huey for their feedback on the poems.

WALKING TESTIMONIES
Richmond is home

Prologue

Based on the Gary family story, 1952

Dear Ciera,

We write this with a longing heart
the journey you are embarking on
is one of horrific tradition
and our life is your testimony
is your roadmap to justice
is your proof of the matter.

We write because we admire the stories
unfolding amongst these pages,
you might call us blown away
by their honesty and the fact
that the fight has yet to cease
in this beloved city.

Listen, Richmond was the home
we fought the hardest for.

We made a home in between Kaiser shipyards and a war zone,
one Black house on an all white block.

Against ghostly men,
out for Black blood, we,
a mass of races gathered
weaving together our place of refuge
and now we pass the torch
through this letter.

If you stand your ground long enough,
you might see the shadow of the cross burning
on our lawn, as it fades away.

Don't grow weary.

This story is merely a symbol, a note,
perhaps a scriptures all the more,
saying that this too
shall pass.



1935 Federal Housing Authority Loan Underwriting Manual: "If a neighborhood is to retain stability it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes."²
Photo: Richmond Independent, March 5, 1952

House Enough

Was I not grand enough
before I became mother?
Was I not house enough
to keep the rain off my
children's face?
And here I am,
a house without a foundation,
a woman without a home.

I did my best to pay off my mortgage
Struggled to keep up with the payments
Worked myself to near death
for a home I would eventually
no longer be able to afford
Defeat came in the form of bankruptcy
I said my last prayer in the house
I raised my children in
and left.

I poured my smiles and my anguish
into each layer of that house
Threw children's parties, held praise and worship
in my living room
Welcomed God with all the melody in my soul
I made my home into a church
I am merely a servant
and I will forever carry these things in my spine,
be a walking testimony.

We are always trying to find someone else to blame:
Who started the fire,
or who bought the lighter?

But when you are a Black Woman,
when you are a house with no windows,
the system holds no fault,
the consequences leech off your skin.
You can't be a hero when the world decided
to make you villain from the womb.
And who was I to think I could be different?

I worked my whole life
and am still not able to afford myself
in my retirement.
Instead I make a home out of all I have left,
I learn to take the hard moments
and lay them like brick.
Even in all the turmoil,
my smile makes it out.
And isn't that what home is for.

From 1934 to 1959, the Federal Housing Authority guaranteed more than half the home purchase mortgages in the US. Of these, only 2 percent were loans made to African Americans.³

When the areas were being developed during World War II and soon after, lots in North Richmond - the only place African Americans could purchase property in Richmond - were zoned at 25 feet wide. Atchison Village, which was exclusively white, had 15 foot setbacks from the curb and 20 feet between homes.⁴

Nationwide, leading up to the foreclosure crisis, African American and Latino homebuyers were given subprime and other risky loans three times as often as white homebuyers.⁵

By 2011, approximately a quarter of Latino and African American homeowners lost their home to foreclosure or were seriously delinquent due to the foreclosure crisis. This rate was nearly twice as high as the rate for white homeowners.⁶

During the Great Recession (2007 to 2009), Richmond homes lost, on average 66 percent of their value and 16 percent of homeowners lost their homes due to foreclosure.⁷



Photo: In a poetry workshop series facilitated by the author, residents aged 7-10 of the Manor (Monterey Pines) housing complex played a modified game of monopoly. The players renamed the game properties with Richmond neighborhoods and each player took on different race and class identities. The rules were changed for each player according to the history of housing access in Richmond. The red tape represents the redlining of African American neighborhoods in Richmond, such as North Richmond, where many banks wouldn't provide loans.

Rally Song

Solidarity is the harmony I was greeted with
when Richmond became my home.

I am both a mother to my kids,
and a testimony to my community.
I help to organize actions, in the same way
I fight to create a home for my family
with one fist raised
and the other hand holding my ill child,
in between my agony and my strength,
there is no other option

I am proud to be a resident of Richmond,
But I grow weary here too
The sky changes often,
the air becomes more harsh,
and the people here, can be both gracious
and monstrous.
My landlord, a man of color,
named himself Lord,
made it his business
to only rent out his apartments to people like me:
people who lack the language
but are in need of the necessity.
I only wanted a home for my family
and he only wanted more money
what seemed like every couple of months.
He did not think of me as strong,
did not think I would fight back,
but I am not a doormat.
It started with a letter,
which formed an army of my community,

with my child still cupped to my chest.

There was a time where
I wanted to leave and return to Mexico
But my child needed me
so I stood firm
and we fought hard.
And I know better than to think this war is over,
but I celebrate when I can.



Detail of the Staying Power mural at 23rd Street and Ohio Avenue in Richmond.



Diego Rivera. *The Uprising*. 1931. Accessed via: <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2011/rivera/content/mural/uprising/detail.php>

Butterfly & Moth

I go anywhere in this body

I am not anchored to any city
but Richmond is my home,
is the place my children graduated.
This place helped me raise my children
both for good and bad.
And isn't that the point of home?
The first place we fall, cry, and
get back up again.

Living in Richmond
has given me solitude
and community,
raised me to be both butterfly and moth.
Richmond is the ugly truth in the flesh.
I learned early on to be
unfazed by labels society spins together,
being a Black woman has made me
love life more deeply,
has taught me resilience
and so I continue to live.

In a home I have only partial ownership of,
often filled with unwanted guests
daily decorating the parking lot,
I suppose we are all in a fight to make this place home,
bringing all our different definitions to the table
but no one speaks so it seems
we all go hungry at the end of the day.

Moving is out of the question.
They just lowered the rent back to \$1250

and I can't afford to take the chance
to move and find there's nothing.
I make too much to be on Section 8
and too little to find a place
that might actually feel like home.
No front yard, little parking, no playgrounds for my children,
but one thing I am certain of;
Richmond either makes soldiers or takes them,
and I am somewhere in the middle of that
waiting.

I call her mother

She is a city that called me son
even when she didn't birth me,
a mother made of laughter and
boarded up houses smelling
of unanswered prayers.

Sour, bitter even and still I found
some kind of reason for being here
Richmond kept her children tucked
into her bosom,
tried her best to hide us from the smog,
tried to sing us a softer song than sirens,
give us a canvas of melanin
instead of the constant blue and red
Black bodied and dead,
spiraling out of our Black hands.

She is the kind of mother
that would never kick me out,
push me into disappearance.
But everyone is born with the power of self-determination
We, free beings often fall into self-caused collision
as our society births a new temptation
at every sunrise and sunset.

I made mistakes
but still I pray that the only home I know
does not foreclose my mouth
and starve the joy out of me.
Yes, I've found myself incarcerated in
the house of hell
Call it legalized slavery
Call me numbers

I lived in the thick of turmoil,
fell into a bottomless chasm,
a whirlpool of jazz and blues
and I've done my due.

But she,
Richmond, loves deep to the core,
is the kind of mother that
hold the door open,
exposes the ugly of the world
and hangs your picture up in the front room
to say, my child, you are always welcome

They call her
Home of thugs & crack babies
Even,
A resting place for criminals
Or,
Keeper of the ugliest of things.

I see Richmond
as a scolding but loving parent
and society as CPS taking and displacing her children
As if we were not artists and activists
Were not sun-kissed and blessed
Were not learning to love again

Richmond
Is the replanting of my pride
Is the reassurance of my purpose
Is the purging of that story that I
only ever deserved a goodbye



27 percent of the racial wealth gap can be attributed to homeownership disparities alone but other key factors such as employment, income and inheritance can also be impacted by homeownership due to a host of place based effects such as school quality or the location of businesses.⁸

Photo: Vanessa Yang. Detail of Staying Power mural process.

During WWII, police would stop African American men in Richmond on the street - if they couldn't show proof of employment they would be jailed.⁹

By 1947, 25 percent of African American males were unemployed and 39 percent of African American females were unemployed.¹⁰

U.S. incarceration rates by race and ethnicity in 2010: the rate is nearly 6 times higher for African Americans than whites, and 2.5 times higher for Latinos than whites.¹¹

In 2016, Richmond adopted the Fair Chance Housing policy, which prohibits affordable housing providers from asking about an applicant's previous conviction history.¹²

This body embody Richmond

This body embody Richmond.
In all its loud laughs and triggers,
this body live just like its city,
confined and still breathing,
knows all of pain and still thriving,
sees the shifting of our children
and prays for tradition.

This body is a home
is a mother
is formerly incarcerated
is a good woman

This body is displaced.
Moved outside of the place I gave birth in
and still my love for it
is unruly,
is a fighter for justice
because no matter what pain
I associate with Richmond,
it will always be my home
regardless of my lack of address.

I made a home on a couch,
next to candle light,
a home out of a garage.
My memories live here,
my smile was sparked here,
my community was nurtured here.
Every “black out” became a party,
became a family reunion amongst
folks who would never consider themselves strangers

after that night.
We became family,
became the grandma with the icees and pickles in her house,
became the black mothers unafraid to scorn any black child
when they needed it.
Because back then it took a village
and today, it takes a village,
but ours seems to be burning away.
I see the last of my childhood friends in the embers
and I know it gets hard,
but I am too much like my city,
I don't know how to give up.

Richmond is my reflection
And I am worthy

Firmly planted

I found flowers
planted in the center of my body
and I named myself garden
I want to tell you about where I grew myself

Grandma's living room was the soil of our family legacy
Her house was the very center of my family.
If I found myself in Richmond,
I found myself here
Here is where I watered my seeds of self-love
and pulled any weeds of self-doubt
amongst cousins over tea time
and cartoons
the walls painted with our childhood banter
tables dented from our wild laughter
We roamed grandma's house as if
it was our fortress

Grandma taught me how to grow these flowers
and I learned how to dig deep within my soil.
To be full and wonderful
To be a woman of melanin
To plant such beautiful things like
hugs, and sweet kisses
My grandma planted seeds of success
and I made degrees bloom from my mind
My garden rewards sacrifice
My garden is watered by my ancestors grace
and we all weeped in harmony

My journey is a found poem
some words taken out of the media's mouth
some stanzas taken out of all the grief underneath these roots

Early on I knew I was not to be a statistic.
Yes, Black, and woman, and child of Richmond,
just as much as I am educated, conscious, furious and loving.

I want to tell all the people moving here
of the beauty of my city
just as much as I want them to see the
drought and devastation they are bringing.
How their new homes are covering my garden
burying all the young Black kids' dreams of
buying their parents homes
Maybe there is no ill intention
but when the wealthier folks moved in,
drank of our cultures
built over our history,
they pushed me and my mama to Sacramento
even though she worked herself to the bone.
Took me away from grandma's house,
their migration dissecting my body,
pulling plants from soil.

I haven't gotten to replant here
Don't you ever think we want to come back?
Harvest what I learned through grandma's hands,
recreate the sanctuary she started ?
After all, this has always been our garden



Between 2000 and 2013, Richmond's African American population dropped by 35 percent from 35,300 to 22,800. During that time, the city's Latino population increased by 62 percent, the Asian and Pacific Islander population grew by 26 percent and the white population stayed about the same.¹³

Photos: Evan Bissell



Ciera-Jevae Gordon 29

Souls of lost folk

My hood is home to
both the sound of bullets and grandparents cackling
more corner stores than libraries
both a brutal and beautiful past.

Richmond must have swallowed
All of these gun wars and my mama's prayers
in order to birth my kind of confidence
I am the dreams
they could not stop from becoming a reality
I brag different
Smile bigger
Wear the souls of my lost folks
on my shoulders
I am an oasis
bringing light and love
into this place they call Gotham
they call God-forsaken
God forgive them
for they know not
what peace be among them

I am a walking testimony
of eulogies & newly planted poppies
Call this Black boy joy
Or Richmond's finest

Everybody knew me
through my mama or daddy
or siblings
This is what you call a village
I roamed every part of my city

something Godsent,
where every block was a new culture
an opportunity to learn a new way of being
a new language or dialect or style
and we all spoke,
we all joked
and little kids knew what it meant to be a child.
What it meant to laugh and be loved,
to be scolded and still belong

When they were alive,
I watched OG's like a chess game
they taught me moves
until the last soldier, or queen or king fell.
My queen,
my mother
fell long before she should have
and death quickly swung into my life;
a rampant disease.
It seems like I could fill a grave with names
way before I could fill a church pew
with the friends I still have.

Many things have tried to scare me from my home
but I belong in the city of pride and purpose.
Just look at me;
I hold my halo high
using my mother's smile
to light it everyday,
using my elders' knowledge to guide my footsteps,
placing youth on my shoulders,
becoming the giant they need

during their lifetime.
Walking across the tracks,
burying the brutality
by making the first step
to give a handshake to the boys
on the other side of the block

Repair Estimate

PREPARED FOR
CIERA GORDEN

Service Advisor

Date 09/28/2017 04:07 PM
2008 HO ELEMENT
VIN 5J6YH2B386L022870
Mileage 140,379
RO# 553430

Service Name	Price
[Primary]: 18HOZ-ENGLT : ENGINE LIGHT ON	0.00
[Primary]: 01HOZ-TIREPRES : TIRE PRESSURE CHECK	0.00
Head Gasket Replacement	2079.74
Radiator Replacement	895.20
Thermostat Replacement	336.79
Compliance Bushings	500.51
Alignment	109.95
Printed on September 28, 2017	
Quote expires on October 28, 2017	
Subtotal	3922.19
Total	3922.19

Two years after the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* ruled, “separate facilities inherently unequal,” the road to spatial segregation was paved by the Interstate Highway Act. The 1956 act was the most expensive public works project in the history of the world. President Eisenhower (formerly a general) justified the immense project as a network of National Defense Highways to better respond to the risk of a Cold War attack and committed \$27 billion dollars to highway building by the end of the 1960s. This was supported by a second federal act in 1956 to support the construction of sewer systems, allowing for suburbs to extend further away from city sewer systems.¹⁴

She loves freedom

She loves freedom
found love in June
when teens and elders crowd
Nichols Park.
Call it family
call it reunion
call it home.
This sanctuary is
Grandpa's peach cobbler
& cousins making a playground
into a child's mansion
They called her song bird
cause she found God
in a hymnal on the 3rd church pew
on the southside of Richmond

She pursued college
cause Richmond told her so,
say, *Child, if you want safety and stability
you need an education
higher than this city can take you.*
So she flee, did four years away

Expecting to return to prideful arms,
instead she is turned away,
told, *Child, didn't you realize we were leaving?*

She wonder about fleeing too,
to somebody else house,
and pray she can call it shelter,
call it sanctuary,
one day.

Today, she work and breathe Richmond
from a distance.

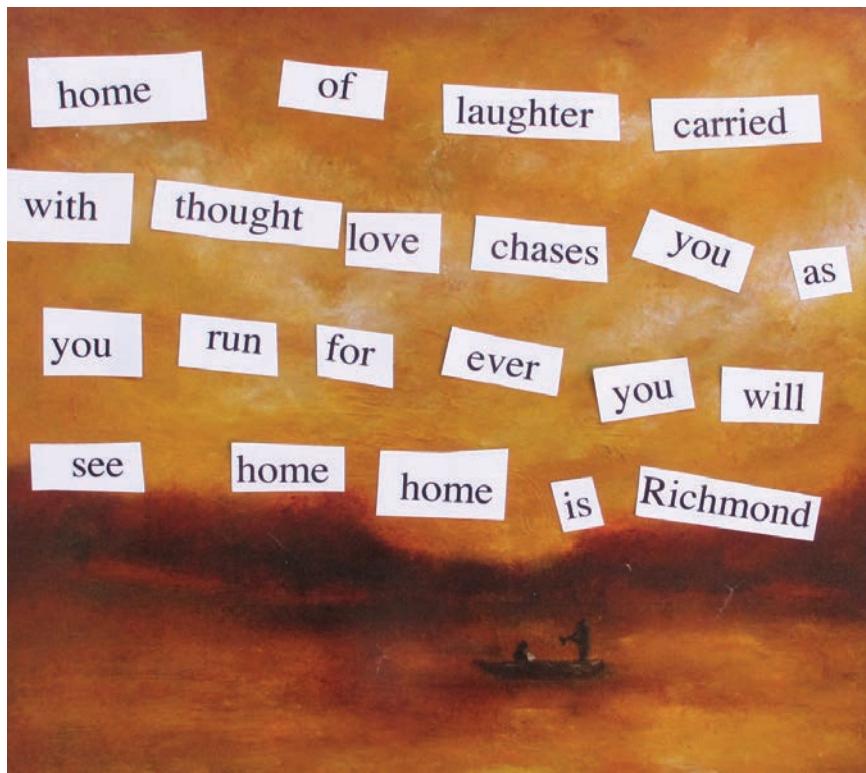
She, first Black woman

(She wonder if her skin is the reason)
poet laureate of her home.

(if it scream something terrible and ugly)
Put a masters after her name,

(things always seem more complicated)
works 5 jobs
wake to sunrise,
and drive the daily miles
to show up for her brother, sisters, mothers,
friends, youth, community.
She drive this much because
what is the consequence of long distance
when the destination is home?

At the end of the day
she drives the 22.4 miles
to where she sleeps
just to dream of peace
back home



Collage poem created during a poetry workshop series facilitated by the author for residents aged 7-10 of the Manor (Monterey Pines) housing complex, Richmond.

Interview questions

1. How do you define community, and what was your first community?
2. Having a sense of community means that there is a strong sense of belonging, how is belonging created or highlighted in your community?
3. Do you engage with people within your community, why or why not?
4. When was a time you felt disconnected from your community/home and what how did you combat that?
5. Can a home exist without a community?
6. What if any are your practices to welcome new people into the community?
7. What have your challenges been in looking for a place to make your home out of.

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