

Completed selection *“blk_grls_x-ing”* originally published in *Fourth Genre* February 2017, and selected as a notable work of 2017 in *Best American Essays 2018*, edited by Hilton Als and Robert Atwan

blk grls x-ing
by Cherise Morris



Dance with me / I know I'm free / Dance with me / I know I'm free
-Noname

This past August brought us slam-poet-turned-rapper Noname's long-awaited debut mixtape *Telefone*, a smooth, melodic, dreamy glimpse into the mind of a Black girl going through it. Facing death, (bad) habits, and internal ghosts, the listener rides on the handlebars of her bicycle as Noname transports us through the streets of Chicago and the maze of her beautiful and brilliant mind. Her parables are uniquely hers, articulated through the emotive quality and masterful resonance of her distinctive flow -- low-key and measured, croaky and unbothered, modulated and quavering but nonetheless firmly planted -- Noname exposes the joys, pains, disturbances, and eccentricities of *the ordinary*.

Timid in manner, her tonal shifts and topical traipsing she boldly exalts the act of meandering. The 24-year old's weighty lyricism paints meandering as a millennial form of art -- especially when juxtaposed against the constant urgency and uncertainty of life as Black girl in poor neighborhood, rich with feeling. This fact of life is made painfully clear with lyrics like *“I'm trying to re-imagine abracadabra for poverty/Like poof I made it disappear/Proof I'm made of happiness/Everything is everything”* from “Forever.”

The artist's intentions to bring us along on an unhurried stroll through her own thoughts become evident by the album's midpoint. A few apathetic repetitions of “I thought I was gone write a rap,” preface track six “Freedom (Interlude),” a manifesto on meandering that leaves the usually witty wordsmith dazed and mumbling by the end. Ask any person marginalized with a political conscious and they'll probably tell you it's a familiar feeling: when you think you're gonna do one thing, then something reminds you of the ever-perilous state of yourself, and you're, all of a sudden, distracted and pondering freedom. The song -- consummated by [Nina Simone's personal reflections on freedom](#) -- like much of the rest of the album is an exercise in accepting free association and penning one's own asides.

She meanders, but not for nothing, working through personal beliefs and experience as they relate to oftentimes conflicting messages from society: *“And I know the money don't really make me whole/The magazine covers drenched in gold/The dreams of granny in mansion and happy/The little things I need to save my soul.”* Whether its freedom, fame, loss, or vice in Noname's universe, one is perpetually trying to figure it out.

More so than meandering, Noname tells a story of coping, and coping as art. And meandering to cope.

Coping is talent. Coping is time and some wandering. Coping is all we have. Sometimes wandering is a means of coping, but that's not always enough. Coping is multitudinous, but one thing is constant: an intimate awareness of the art of coping is a principle in Black girlhood and a prerequisite for Black womanhood.

When I first heard *Telefone*, I heard an interrogation of how one manages to manage. I heard a tale of entrances and departures, and how to cope through all of it. Tracks seven and nine, somber and slow stories of lost loves and lost lives, "Casket Pretty" and "Bye Bye Baby" most of all underscore the significance of departures. From "Bye Bye Baby's" "Ooh you know I hate goodbye," to Forever's, "Ooh, my cigarette burning," classic R&B soliloquies and backyard BBQ soundscapes propel the album's plot, showing us Noname's hood and the sights, sounds, tastes, textures and aromas that comprise it.

Heavy in layers, a musky cloud enveloped me, the all too familiar odor of smoke -- a dusty, earthy burn emanated from the smoldering embers of the cigarette she clasped.

I was finally meeting one of my heroes, Alicia Garza. Talking with the powerhouse Black woman organizer was a dream come true, however there was nothing was too special about the meeting, itself. More pertinent for right now: the point of departure, the moment when an all too familiar wind swept me away.

I had witnessed Garza, modest as ever, wrestle her way out of the teeming crowd that flocked to her in the conference minutes earlier. I had introduced myself to her moments before, and she had greeted me with an encompassing hug, as if we had met before, and asked, "Girl, how are you," with such striking sincerity. I thought she hurried out of the grand dining hall to catch a plane to another speaking engagement or meeting or personal errand.

But when I reencountered her outside, her flight from the room came into focus.

The intimate tickle in the body that perturbs the senses and makes you thrust yourself toward the closest, freest exit, find the nearest, emptiest courtyard to light up in. You look for a spot to loiter in. The one facing the most stimulating cross-section of scenery that will best keep your mind and eyes occupied as you drag. It doesn't hit the same anymore, but the hint of heady rush is still there and that's enough.

I was about two weeks clean, when Garza reminded me of myself. The coolness of her every exhaust reignited memories of a lingering self. She was smoking. And in that moment, I missed it more than anything. I lamented the missed opportunity to step out for a smoke alongside her and ask for light as a way of igniting conversation and felt naive for forcing myself to quit after seeing Garza doing that very thing.

I waved goodbye to Garza as I passed.

I grew up in smoky darkness. It took me twenty years to realize the smell of cigarette-burdened air wasn't the standard aroma in most homes. My sophomore year roommate asked me to "please stop smoking cigarettes in the room," because it was "stinking up" her clothing and her mother had been chiding her about (what she considered) my "bad habits" (which I knew as the only way to keep my head on).

But, to me, it felt more like home that way with smoke there to shove all the pain and boredom and worry away into the dark corners. My mother and I found comfort levitating in our own clouds of smoke.

I grew up a passive smoker. I grew up on linoleum floors where I sat weeping, learning how to exhale without opening my mouth smoke trickling through my nose secondhand.

I grew up at ten years old with my first inhale of nicotine. My coming of age was witnessed by my four older cousins. We took our own Gikuyu¹, in the backwoods of Virginia with a stolen pack of Newports.

Smoking was a coming to consciousness for me, and for my mother, too -- a smoker for four decades. Every inhale stained our lungs with another streak of anticipation or discontent or apathy. Huffing and puffing and trying to get free, we coped.

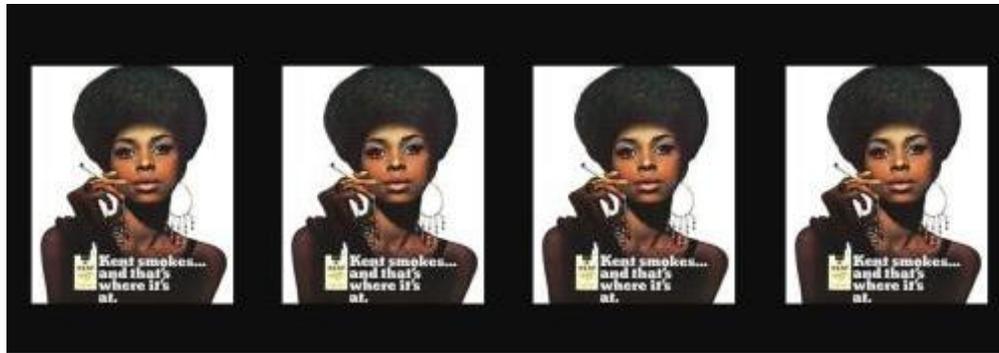
That same year, my grandfather died and I finally got my own room. And with space and time and mine and Momma's own beds to stretch out in, our nighttime ritual began to fade away. From three breathy articulations of love till morning

Good night.	Good night.
Nightie-night.	Nightie-night.
I love you.	I love you.

to a simple "good night" until it was no longer even that. But between the space and lines of worry, a billow of smoke connected us.

An arsenic exhale meant "*love you.*" In those deep inhales, we held court together.

¹ An oath of a secret movement, associated with the Mau Mau Rebellion in Kenya



In “Yesterday,” chain-smoking, along with internet surfing, gives structure to her days, *Basket case silhouette, cigarette, internet.*

In “Sunny Duet,” they replace an old vice, *Cigarettes over blunts now.*

In “All I Need,” they make a vow to her, *Everything is everything/A cigarette for wedding ring.*

In “Reality Check,” they seduce her and keep her company when she’s lonely, *Cigarettes on my mantle keep callin me by my first name/Loving me when I’m lonely.*

Ooh, my cigarette burning, my momma be calling, they’re right there with her in “Forever,” and through the panic in “Bye Bye Baby,” *Cigarette's over Skyfall.*

In six of *Telefone’s* ten tracks, Noname mentions smoking. A subtle motif that follows her throughout the narrative, cigarettes -- and smoking them -- takes on a mundane significance for Noname in her everyday processes of overcoming, coming to, “*running out of ways to....*”

Hearing Noname spit her proclivities to nicotine, I felt an immediate kinship. Smoking to cope. Coping to smoke. Ashes to ashtray.

By keeping her numerous references to smoking short and sweet, Noname establishes cigarettes and the act of smoke them, as a simple fact of life -- not worthy of much afterthought, but nevertheless something of unquestionable important in her life.

A simple fact of life: Black girls smoking -- a thing of deep-web fetishes, quotidian realities, and dreams come true.

Black Women Smoking - YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLL7GW69NiQsUeCo9ItPssdQ2jnA7ANfJ4> ▼

Sep 18, 2015 - Black Women Smoking ... Smoking Fetish- Lady DelFumare. by Lady ... EBONY GODDESS FEMDOM SMOKING TEASE-CLOSE UP.

Candid black girl smoking - YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Gtvmd8Zhc> ▼

Apr 11, 2012 - Candid black girl smoking ... Up Next. Legendary Girls Club Nr. 1 || 45min Smoking Girlies! ... Duration: 3:15. Super Woman 1,907 views. 3:15.

Hot ebony girl smoking 120s cigarettes - YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3r60wuk6hM> ▼

Nov 22, 2012 - Hot ebony girl smoking 120s cigarettes. ... Hot ebony girl smoking 120s cigarettes . Smoking - Models. SubscribeSubscribedUnsubscribe 9,563 ...

smoke fetish - YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDopRG3ktUc> ▼

Feb 18, 2008 - sexy ebony lady smoking like a pro. ... Up Next. Legendary Girls Club Nr. 1 || 45min Smoking Girlies! Sassy/Nikki/Lynn - Duration: 45:49.

When black girls smoke - YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1I7n9HPK7iY> ▼

Before Cotton was King, Tobacco reigned. And they shipped people who looked like us over by the millions to serve the king. “Tobacco was responsible for the introduction of slavery to the New World,” writes author Iain Gately in *Tobacco: A Cultural History of How an Exotic Plant Seduced a Civilization*. As the tobacco industry began to swell throughout the Upper South of the soon-to-be United States of America, so did the mass importation of enslaved peoples from the African continent. Throughout the 18th century Tobacco continued to seduce, demanding a larger percentage of imported slave labor than any other crop in the nascent colonies.

The production of tobacco drove the importation of enslaved Africans. Not only was the leafy, sticky plant used to kill the enslaved, it was used to *keep them alive*. By presumably quenching hunger and improving mood during torturous Middle Passage voyages, tobacco was integral to our enslavement and our death – but also to our living. The exotic, coveted commodity and its addictive properties were manipulated by enslavers who, “apparently believed that such measures were useful in their efforts to control their ‘cargo’ and avoid or minimize social unrest and revolts—or even put the enslaved in a better mood prior to their being sold or transshipped from one American port to another.”

The ultimate story of departures and enduring -- The Middle Passage – can also be told through smoke circles.

I was reared in smoke, inhaled every puff of lonesome, waiting, and worry. Cigarette butts wrote my name across a landscape that didn't want me. They were a simple adhesive that kept me feeling close to Momma.

If I die from these one day, at least it was self-inflicted pain, right? Self-determination, and that's what we're all looking for, right? Can't worry about my lungs in thirty years when I'm worrying about today ... and tomorrow... and the next day. As long it is all contained in the weight of my formaldehyde breath, pushed out of me and into the browning filter tip of my eternal ride or die, my most-dysfunctional love affair ever: My Marlboro Gold. My warning: Black-girl-crossing sign. Warning: Black_Girl_Coping.

Acetone. Ammonia. Self-determination. Cadmium, carbon monoxide, butane-beauty, tar, mybaby, till we smoke ourselves silly. Big tobacco targets Black folk anyway -- so if I go into it knowing this thing will kill me, does that make that revolutionary suicide? If the crux of Black life in this country is the pursuit of Black death, this here is our cyanide Kool aid.

We'll keep huffing and puffing and trying to get free, Momma and me.