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Clara Brown

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2021 Vassar Miller Poetry Award

Clara Brown by Nancy E. Wright

Wildflowers grow in the most barren places.
Boulders balance on the smallest of rocks.
Clara Brown—her ancestors left on some African shore,
her family ripped from the fabric of her heart,
sewn into the anonymity of another master's tapestry,
while the lark bunting spun freedom's song over blue columbine.

Boulders balance on the smallest of rocks.
Manumitted upon the death of her master,
mandated to leave Kentucky, lest her freedom return to bondage,
she created *her* mandate: to find her stolen family.
What she once did as property, she would now do for hire;
she would cook and clean her way to make her freedom pay.

Clara Brown—her ancestors left on some African shore,
was hired on a wagon train of prospectors for gold.
Her dream of gold was to find her stolen family.
She cooked in Colorado for prospectors and miners.
She cooked in abundance accidentally on purpose,
and gave what was left to the territory's homeless.

Her family ripped from the fabric of her heart
were now scattered remnants in the torn quilt of a wounded nation.
Clara Brown opened a bakery, store, chapel, and laundry.
The Jacksonian democracy that he would have denied her
was brilliant and beckoning, like sun-washed linen in the wind of freedom,
hotter than gold fever, blazing brighter than the gold.

Sewn into the anonymity of another master's tapestry
no longer, Clara Brown's loved ones were still
unraveled outcomes of injustice.
Clara Brown searched hard for every loose thread.
She kept vigil from the store, the altar, the clothesline,
for a sign or sojourner who might be one of her beloved.

While the lark bunting spun freedom's song over blue columbine,
friends who could write wrote and received letters on her behalf

that reported:

Her husband Richard was dead.

Her daughter Margaret was dead.

Her son Richard was lost.

No one knew about her daughter Eliza Jane.

Perhaps she was still in Kentucky.

Clara Brown journeyed there, but Eliza Jane was not there.

Clara Brown returned to Colorado and continued
to help freed families make their freedom pay.

Many years later a friend had moved to Council Bluffs, Iowa,
and reported seeing Eliza Jane in the post office.

Clara Brown journeyed there. The friend had arranged
for the two to meet.

Clara Brown stepped from train to trolley.
From the trolley she spotted a woman
running toward her.

Mother and daughter embraced and would not let go.

Clara Brown, her daughter Eliza Jane, and her granddaughter
returned to Colorado and remained there together
until Clara Brown died.

Clara Brown was declared the first official Colorado pioneer
who was not a white man and became the only female member
of the Pioneer Association.

Playwright Roger Baker wrote the play, *Aunt Clara*.

Composer Henry Mollicone and librettist William Luce wrote the opera,
Gabriel's Daughter.

Her memorial chair adorns the Central City Opera House, and
through a stained glass window, she keeps vigil from
the Colorado State Capitol rotunda, to ensure that the boulders continue
to find new balance, and that the lark bunting continues to spin
freedom's song over blue columbine.