for Hanson

Black bodies buried beneath this fresh and Black soil can no longer speak. and their names are jotted down, but their stories haven’t been told. in the courtyard, by the fountain, pen in hand, rear in chair, i ponder about whether i have the right to write and tell the stories of those bodies. i breathe in the quiet and chill air, hoping Hanson, the enslaved cook, will guide my hand as i write notes on his recipes onto my crumpled pad. the woodlawn estate looms over me and it scares and excites my imagination when my fingers crack and tremble from dragging my black pen across the white pages. the Black ink seeps into the white notepad, blotting out the plainness. i stand up and stretch my hands, i put my headphones on, press play, and listen to “Coffee Bean” by Travis Scott— “Feel like someone’s readin’ your horoscope/some shit only me and the Lord knows/SOS, that’s for those who hear this in morse code/Too many doors closed…” i turn the knob and open the white door to the woodlawn bridal suite. i sit on the couch and check the internet for information on Hanson. google Hanson into the search bar. click: william cook hanson is the first name that pops up as the first result. the rest of the results are white names and white faces. barely anything can be found on Hanson. the ac unit rattles and the brilliant light from the lamp dims, as if on cue. Hanson was the cook, which made him pertinent in the lives of the white family who lived at the woodlawn estate. because he cooked, created, and cultivated the food, Hanson resided in the kitchen, meaning he slept there after he labored for hours, baking bread in a beehive shaped oven, next to a fireplace that burned all day, every day. there’s a cook book that features two of his recipes in a book of over 90 recipes. this is Hanson’s recipe for Breakfast Biscuits: “Take a quart of dough, add butter the size of a hen’s egg, work it up very well so as to mix the butter & dough well, roll it out 3 or 4 times cut it in small pieces, roll them up like an Egg, just flatten them a little with the rolling pin, set them by a few minutes to rise, & bake them in a slow oven.” i borrowed this recipe from nelly custis lewis’ housekeeping book, which was edited with an introduction by patricia brady schmit. to show how many of the recipes in the book were most likely “borrowed” from Hanson, to segue, i eat my meatball sub and drink my orange soda. i think about food. i think about traveling to get food. i think about food and travel. i think about Anthony Bourdain. i think about Hanson; i think about Anthony Bourdain. i think about Hanson; i think about Anthony Bourdain. i think about Hanson; i finish eating and open up the white door and walk outside. on sunday, i work at the arcadia center’s farm and maneuver a wheelbarrow around the bumps and ridges
of the damp grass. as rain plummets onto the green land, 
i take a moment to reflect, my knee bleeding from a cut. 
i remember my residency week and wander, lost in thoughts. 
there i am again. i sit back in my chair and stare at the white 
tarpaulin where they host the weddings. i wonder if 
Hanson was married. i wonder if he had children. 
i wonder if he was ever happy. i pick up my pen, 
my hand shuddering, as i scribble words onto the page. 
it feels strange to write about the Black bodies buried 
beneath this rich and Black soil. but I want to honor 
Hanson and the slaves who lived, work, and sacrificed 
their hands, feet, arms, legs, eyes, faces, teeth, and minds 
to build this estate. these Black men and women toiled 
to create this establishment for white families while 
their families lived outside in slave quarters two miles 
away from the property. 

tell me if i have the right 
to write the stories 
of those Black bodies 
buried beneath 
this fresh and Black soil.