

POEMS BY LINDA HOGAN

# The Book of Medicines



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## The Grandmother Songs

The grandmothers were my tribal gods.  
They were there  
when I was born. Their songs  
rose out of wet labor  
and the woman smell of birth.

From a floating sleep  
they made a shape around me,  
a grandmother's embrace,  
the shawl of family blood  
that was their song for kinship.

There was a divining song  
for finding the lost,  
and a raining song  
for the furrow and its seed,  
one for the hoe  
and the house it leaned against.

In those days, through song,  
a woman could fly  
to the mother of water  
and fill her ladle  
with cool springs of earth.

She could fly to the deer  
and sing him down to the ground.

Song was the pathway where people met  
and animals crossed.

Once, flying out of the false death of surgery,  
I heard a grandmother singing for help.  
She came close  
as if down a road of screaming.

It was a song I never knew  
lived inside the muscle  
of this common life.

It was the terror grandmother.  
I'd heard of her.  
And when our fingers and voices met,  
the song  
of an older history came through  
my mouth.

At death, they say  
everything inside us opens,  
mouth, heart, even the ear opens  
and breath passes  
through the memories  
of loves and faces.  
The embrace opens  
and grandmothers pass,  
wearing sunlight  
and thin rain,  
walking out of fire  
as flame  
and smoke  
leaving the ashes.

That's when rain begins,  
and when the mouth of the river sings,  
water flows from it  
back to the cellular sea  
and along the way  
earth sprouts and blooms, the grandmothers  
keep following the creation  
that opens before them  
as they sing.

## Tear

It was the time before  
I was born.  
I was thin.  
I was hungry. I was  
only a restlessness inside a woman's body.

Above us, lightning split open the sky.  
Below us, wagon wheels cut land in two.  
Around us were the soldiers,  
young and afraid,  
who did not trust us  
with scissors or knives  
but with needles.

Tear dresses they were called  
because settler cotton was torn  
in straight lines  
like the roads we had to follow  
to Oklahoma.

But when the cloth was torn,  
it was like tears,  
impossible to hold back,  
and so they were called  
by this other name,  
for our weeping.

I remember the women.  
Tonight they walk  
out from the shadows  
with black dogs,  
children, the dark heavy horses,  
and worn-out men.

They walk inside me. This blood  
is a map of the road between us.  
I am why they survived.  
The world behind them did not close.  
The world before them is still open.  
All around me are my ancestors,  
my unborn children.  
I am the tear between them  
and both sides live.

*Tear dresses are traditional Chickasaw women's clothing.*

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Anachronistic Conversations: Sally & Chet'la

Somewhere between love and Stockholm, you'll find me  
clutching inkwell and shoe buckle.

*You didn't travel your grandmother's Middle Passage  
in linen-lined cabin.*

Even as he became purr of his own musculature,  
he could have unlaced me.

*You are my sister, my mother, the lover  
I don't want to be, but fear that I am.*

In the alcove, I turned my head left,  
no right, to see the skylight.

*Nightingale of America—  
mute, mother-matriarch.*

Quadroon like quarter—not part of town,  
but the only math that counts. Mulatto

*meaning half-ass, half pure-bred: mongrel,  
mutt, more miscegenation-related language.*

But I want to sever the silence

*breathe you back into existence.*

Even though *partus* still *sequitur ventrum*—  
*meaning matrilineal, meaning forever.*

So, this is *remembering*.  
*This is forgetting.*

Anachronistic Conversations: *Chet'la*

*Every time I try to leave,  
you pull me back,*

*Sally—*

*your almost white blackness,  
the interval between our bodies.*

## Timeline

- AGR Annette Gordon-Reed  
EH Elizabeth Hemings  
HH Harriet Hemings (II)  
JC James Thomson Callender  
JH James Hemings  
JMH James Madison Hemings  
MH Mary Hemings  
MJ Martha Wayles Skelton Jefferson  
MJE Maria Jefferson Eppes  
MJR Martha Jefferson Randolph  
SH Sally Hemings  
TB Thomas Bell  
TEH Thomas Eston Hemings  
TJ Thomas Jefferson  
WBH William Beverly Hemings

1735 Elizabeth "Betty" Hemings (EH) is born. She is the daughter of Captain Hemings, an English sea captain, and an enslaved African woman whose name has been lost in history.

1743 Thomas Jefferson (TJ) is born.

1772 TJ marries widow Martha Wayles Skelton (MJ) in January. Their first daughter, Martha "Patsy" (MJR), is born later that year.

1773 EH has Sarah "Sally" Hemings (SH). SH's father John Wayles, who is also MJ's father, dies.

1774 TJ inherits SH, her mother, and her siblings; they all move to Monticello.

- 1778 TJ's daughter Maria "Polly" (MJE) is born.
- 1782 MJ dies. Before she dies, TJ promises her he'll never marry again.
- 1784 TJ travels to Paris—with MJR and James Hemings (JH), SH's enslaved brother—to negotiate treaties for peace with John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, who is serving as the Minister Plenipotentiary for France. While in Paris, JH studies the art of French cuisine.
- 1785 TJ becomes Minister Plenipotentiary (France). He requests that MJE, who is staying with family, travel to France accompanied by a "careful negro woman"; he suggests an enslaved woman named Isabel. TJ publishes the only book he'll publish during his lifetime: *Notes on the State of Virginia*.
- 1786 TJ meets Maria Cosway, a young, married Italian-English artist. They spend an increasing amount of time together and continue to correspond when she leaves Paris. He writes her "The Dialogue between the Head and Heart" letter, in which he discusses his struggle to reconcile the desires of his head and his heart.
- 1787 SH accompanies MJE to Paris because Isabel is pregnant.
- 1789 SH gets pregnant. TJ, JH, SH, MJR, and MJE return to Monticello. The French Revolution begins.
- 1790 SH gives birth to a child who dies shortly thereafter.
- 1792 Mary Hemings (MH), SH's eldest sister—who had been leased to Thomas Bell (TB), a white merchant in Charlottesville, while TJ was in Paris—asks TJ to sell her to TB. TJ agrees, selling MH and her two children by TB to him. TB informally frees and marries MH—making her the first Hemings to live a life outside the confines of slavery.

- 1794 TJ emancipates Robert Hemings, SH's brother.
- 1795 SH's second child, a girl named Harriet Hemings (I), is born.
- 1796 TJ emancipates JH.
- 1797 Harriet (I) dies.
- 1798 William Beverly Hemings (WBH), SH's third child, and the first who will live into adulthood, is born.
- 1799 SH's fourth child, another girl, is born and dies the following year.
- 1800 TJ is elected president. James Thomson Callender (JC) hopes that TJ will appoint him Postmaster of Richmond. TJ does not.
- 1801 SH gives birth to another daughter named Harriet (HH). JH commits suicide.
- 1802 JC prints a story accusing TJ of having a relationship with SH. TJ does nothing to refute the accusations.
- 1804 MJE dies. TJ returns from his presidency for two months.
- 1805 James Madison Hemings (JMH), SH's sixth child, is born.
- 1807 TJ signs a law prohibiting the import of enslaved Africans. EH, SH's mother, dies.
- 1808 Thomas Eston Hemings (TEH), SH's last child, is born.
- 1809 TJ retires. MJR moves to Monticello with her husband and their children.

1822 WBH and HH “run away” from Monticello, though neither is ever pursued. Edmund Bacon, overseer at Monticello, puts HH in a stage coach bound for Philadelphia with \$50. It is presumed both WBH and HH went to Washington, DC.

1826 TJ dies at Monticello on July 4th. JMH and TEH are freed in his will. Although not officially freed in his will, SH is “given her time” and moves to downtown Charlottesville with her two sons.

1835 SH dies.

1873 (James) Madison Hemings relays his memoir to reporter S.F. Wetmore. It is published in the *Pike County Republican* newspaper in Pebble Township in Pike County, Ohio. This becomes the only real record of the SH and TJ narrative by anyone involved in the history.

1974 Fawn M. Brodie publishes *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, the first biography of TJ that seriously considers the possibility of him having a relationship with SH.

1997 Annette Gordon-Reed (AGR) publishes *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*, which establishes the likelihood of a relationship between SH and TJ.

1998 DNA evidence from TEH’s descendants proves that his descendants share a Y-chromosome with TJ.

2008 AGR publishes *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family*.

2018 *The Life of Sally Hemings*, a permanent exhibit, opens at Monticello.