

Are we only born on overcast weekdays?
Black Fridays
And dark Sundays

Where dread heads break Sunday code
In Pelle-Pelles
Black ones
and Buck 50 hats

Pastor begs for tithes
Removes sweat from his brow

Auntie wears her best fit
Showing out on Sista Cobbs

And mama drags me down the pews
Pinching me under my arm
...to keep apperances

Someones grandma that looks like my grandama
Who's actually all of our mama

catches the Holy Ghost
Prays to her goddess
Asking for a second baptism
Through saliva and vocal percussion

...We dance in these shadows

These Spaces
These Dreams
These Dimensions

Morphing and extruding oneself into impossibility

As we spin around globes of fire
With near misses of Black Holes
That aren't holes
But globes of Black Power

Power that takes five dimensions

That holds a one-dimensional point

•

Where it holds weight
Where we hold weight

In the body

Where all laws cease to operate

This book is dedicated to my city, my parents, my other sets of parents, my sister, my aunts, my uncles, my cousins, my friends, my mentors, and those who I loved and those who have loved me. To you, I say thank you for all of the lessons, care, grace, arguments, and protection. Especially when I didn't know I was being protected. I am forever grateful to you all and I hope you know, without all of you. I would have never made it this far.

– Sonnie Wooden

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BOY MEETS WORLD

Foreword by Gioncarlo Valentine

Interview by Tamir Williams

On Sonnie...

Gioncarlo Valentine

I approach this writing with a smile, thinking of Sonnie's gentle way, his sensitivity and his family. I have a vivid memory of him that I revisit often, Sonnie picking me up from Chicago O'hare Airport in July of 2018. Sonnie's excitement to see me, mine to see him, and the relief I felt to be away from the East Coast, post Skowhegan (a prestigious artist residency held in Skowhegan, Maine).

My time there was complicated and mostly very difficult. The people, the distance, the personalities, and the expectations drained me completely. In the days following my return to New York, the residual shock of what I'd just survived echoed through my body and started to suffocate me, I had to flee.

After landing in Chicago, a bit after midnight, Sonnie drove me to The Golden Nugget diner where we crammed into a small booth and talked for hours. We had only met once before this, so I was still learning so much about him, like his complicated love for Chicago and his reliance on academic achievement as validation of his worth. We talked a great deal about family. So much of the trauma that Sonnie is carrying revolves around family and upbringing, lessons of maleness and masculinity learned through and shaped by violence. It's clear that we have that in common.

During my trip to Chicago I got to spend time with his remarkable family. First meeting his lovely and distracted younger sister, Yasmin, who spent almost the entirety of our exchange glaring into her computer screen, gleefully updating her

Youtube channel. The next day I met his Auntie (turned my Auntie), Shelia. Shelia, offered me such an unassuming warmth. From the moment I walked into the door she made me feel that thing I'm so often longing for, an indescribable welcome home, a Black embrace.

Mama, Sonnie's much storied grandmother, was so gentle. She's a woman of few words but she gifted me some the sweetest ones, while cooking up some bacon, eggs, grits, and rice. Sonnie's family's home felt restorative, like exactly what I needed at the precise moment I needed it most. I'll never be able to thank them adequately for their grace and I feel deeply cared for whenever my newly acquired Auntie Shelia asks after me. Since then, Sonnie and I have become good friends. I don't see him nearly as much as I'd like, but whenever we're reunited it feels kindred, like coming home.

Sonnie's intellect, passion, and palatability make imagining futures for him incredibly easy. I can see him, clear as day, working his way through the New York art gallery circuit. I envision him cutting his teeth as a Curatorial Assistant at the MET, working as a curator at MOMA PS1, then opening his own art gallery on the West Side of Chicago. I can imagine him meeting and befriending his idols, rubbing shoulders with Kerry James Marshall, having dinners in Harlem with Thelma Golden and long Sunday afternoon phone calls with Fred Moten. Unfortunately though, I imagine that Sonnie will always be left yearning. Much of his internalized issues have made him feel, far too

often, severed from his Blackness. His propensity toward academia, toward shimmering achievement and acceptance made it difficult for his Black peers to relate to him growing up. This lack of understanding forced him to perform at an early age and in the past, many of our exchanges have felt performative. He is not alone in his struggle to understand his identity, untethered from expectations and roles, but I fear that this complicated relationship with his traumas and the ways they've shaped his identity could keep him in an, "I'm not Black enough" loop forever.

Sonnie is brilliant, impassioned, supportive, and kind. He deserves the kind of life that he wants, the kind of career that leaves a lasting legacy. My wish for him, his growth, and his future is a life full of mirrors. I want every person in his life, every incident to serve as a reflection of who he is at that particular time. I want all of his flaws, imperfections, trauma responses, and performances to be laid bare to him. Moreover, I wish for him to be aware of the mirrors and opened to their reflections. The work of rebuilding one's self, of deep rooted healing is exhaustive and unending. I wish that healing for him and I wish to aid in it for as long as I can.

“What Will Happen to All That Beauty?”
a critical meditation on black interiors, spaces, objects *In Dialogue with Sonnie and the work*
Excerpts from recorded interviews on Feb. 18, 2020 and Feb. 25, 2020

Tamir Williams: Some of the work from this project (Boy Meets World) comes from your previous series called “Westside With Love.” I was looking at that work and I was struck by the attention to interior space, which is a theme that continues to permeate this new series. So I wanted to begin by talking about black interiors or, more so, black interior spaces.

Sonnie Wooden: Growing up in Chicago [...] I was surrounded by a lot of wealthy white people, like [when I was] on the rowing team—I was also on the football team. And before I went to the rowing team, the football team consisted of mainly Black and Latinx people, or mainly just Black people to be honest. And I would hang out with them; I would go to their homes. And their homes looked kind of like mine, you know. And when I went to my white teammates’ homes [in] downtown [Chicago], they were always completely different than mine. And I didn’t understand that. And I never thought about blackness having a spatial relationship and how we assemble things...look at different things and put other things in effective proximity to other things. You know, it’s kind of like a juke joint: we got this lawn chair, and we got this reclining chair; and we got a stool. But if we put them all in like a spatial condition, they can all function the way they’re supposed to (sic).

The will to adorn is the second most notable characteristic in Negro expression. Perhaps his idea of ornament does not attempt to meet conventional standards but it satisfies the soul of its creator. (Zora Neale Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression”)

SW: Everyone I knew seemed to [...] have this similar black [spatial] experience. Everyone I knew had like that image of Black Jesus with the dreads and his hands on his lap. And then there’s like that image of three generations of Black women’s hands holding a cross.

TW: There’s also the Sugar Shack by Ernie Barnes.

SW: (laughter) Yeah, yeah!

TW: Everyone has that painting—like everyone’s grandma has that [painting].

Untitled (Fig. 1.1)

SW: When I think of Black people, I think of objects and spaces...

On the walls of the homes of the average Negro one always finds a glut of gaudy calendars, wall pockets and advertising lithographs. [...] I once saw in Mobile a room in which...a mantel-shelf...[was] covered with a scarf of deep home-made lace, looped up with a huge bow of pink crêpe paper...[it] did not seem out of place to the hostess. (Hurston, “Characteristics”)

For my grandfather...beauty was present in found objects, discarded objects that he rescued and restored because, as he put it, “spirits live there.” His room was full of “treasures.” (Bell Hooks, “Beauty Laid Bare: Aesthetics in the Ordinary”)

SW: ...Authorship is negated in a weird way. Authorship doesn’t matter in those spaces...It’s weird. I like to think of it as a kind of D-I-Y. Blackness is like a constant “do-it-yourself.” And putting on multiple hats. And it’s so hard for me not to bring up Arthur Jafa because he talks about black people making culture in freefall. You know, we’re liking falling down and just grabbing different things. And I’m interested in that [...] My auntie has like a Buddhist thing next to like a dream catcher, next to Mary, next to Black Jesus.

TW: Yeah that goes back to what you were just saying about Arthur Jafa: we’re falling down and just grabbing objects. You land in a space and then you have like this accumulation of objects...and then you just allow them to all exist together even if they wouldn’t traditionally exist together.

SW: Yeah, yeah, you're curating. And they would be curating without even knowing they're curating in a way.

Basketball photo (Fig 1.2)

...the outside was also a place shaped for living. We fashioned that space outside, too. (Hooks, "Beauty")

SW: Of course, in the backyard there's a basketball hoop. Wait, no, it's a tree with a piece of plywood nailed to the tree. And nailed to that plywood that's nailed to the tree is a bottomless milk crate.

TW: For basketball, yeah?

SW: Yeah. I think the relational aesthetics—like wood on tree on milk crate is interesting.

TW: Yeah I like that, too. I was also thinking about that alongside what we were just talking about in regards to black interior display, decor, D-I-Y—how those things extend beyond the actual interior space. We try to adorn everything even outside of our homes...the ways in which our aesthetic extends to the streets, the corners, the sidewalks...

...extending the idea of space beyond internal structures... (Hooks, "Beauty")

Mom and Yas (Fig. 1.2)

Or,

On being Black and (almost) still — towards an aesthetic of leaning Black restfulness

SW: ...I wanted to get her (my sister) to sit down and just take a picture of her and just have it.

TW: A moment of stillness for all of them?

Two Black female figures sit and lean across a large bed. Loosely planted at the foot of the bed, the seated figure works to tie her head scarf; her feet still touch the floor, seemingly implying that she will quickly stand after completing her task. Her reclining companion, too, rests lighting across the bed with her feet dangling off to the side. She props herself up on one arm as she scrolls through the contents of her cellphone, perhaps to quickly share some news with the other woman before departing from this lounging position. Her body momentarily mirrors the slouching pillows that are piled up behind her.

Sara Admed has tackled the relationship between spaces, bodies, objects, and orientations.

How do we inhabit spaces?

Admed posits that "spaces...acquire the shape of the bodies that 'inhabit' them, which makes some people feel in place, or at home, and not others."

Comfort, and spaces of comfort, then arise when bodies and objects are 'in line' with one another.

In *Mom and Yas* we see the negotiations of such 'in-line'ments:

Black bodies - bed. Black bodies - rest. Black bodies - stillness.

Blackness.

Stillness.

Will they always be antitheses?

Kemi Adeyemi writes on Black lean aesthetics and its "quotidian acts of dissent."

The lean eludes complete stillness in its refusal to lie completely horizontal. It's a wayward stillness. a wayward restfulness.

SW: ...I don't think we (Black folx) sit still very often. That's why a lot of my pictures are candid because that's as still as they get...





































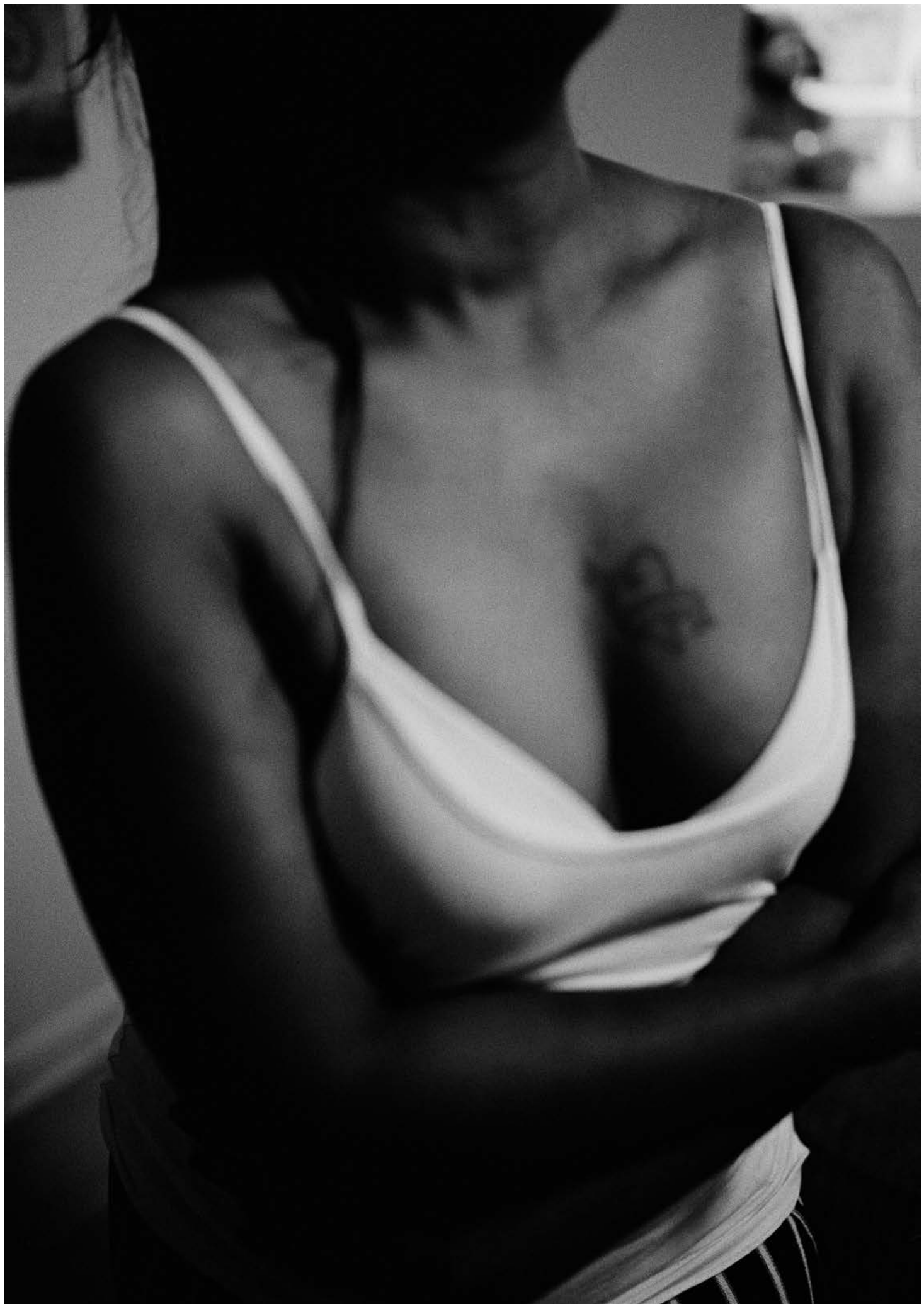
















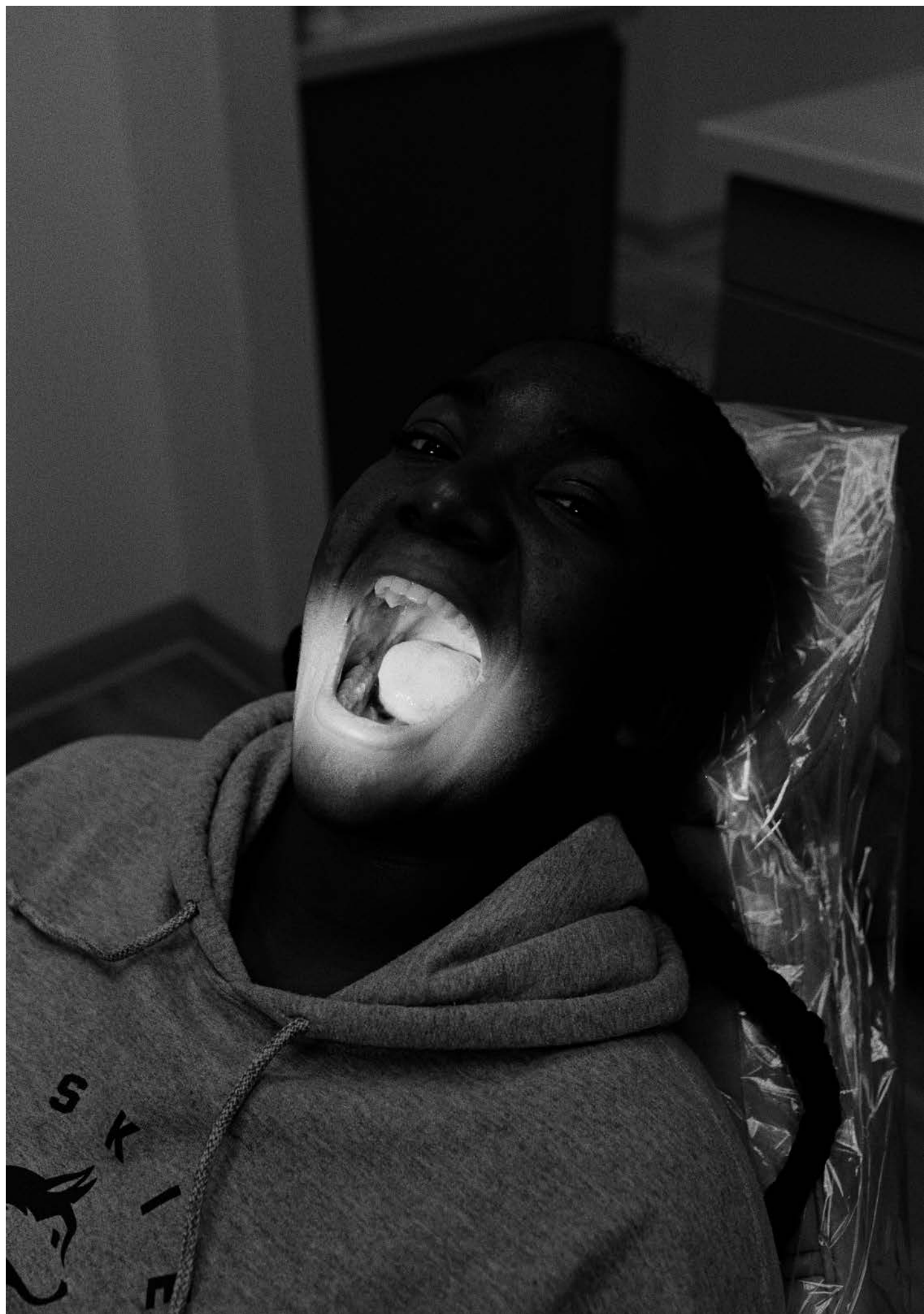












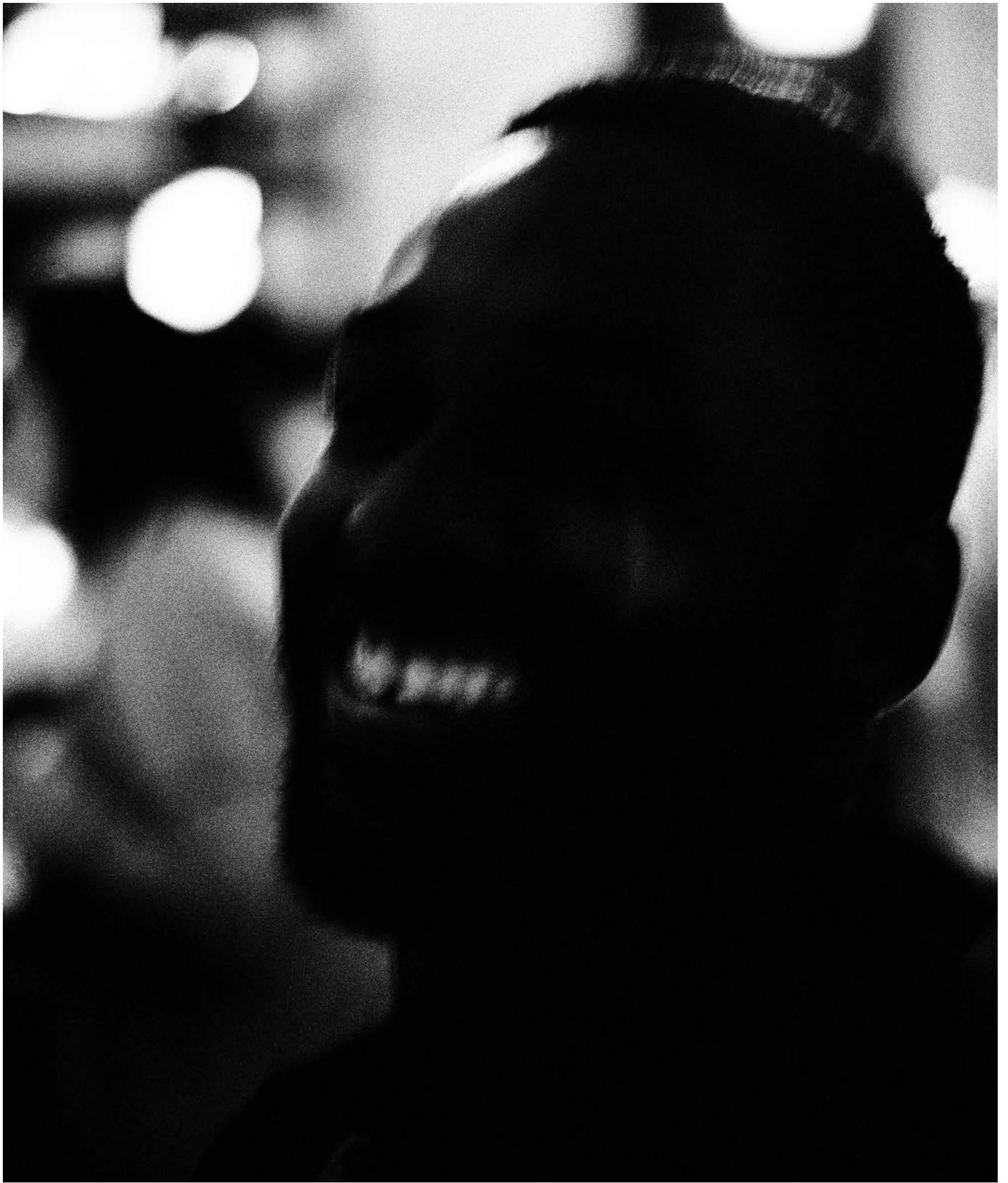


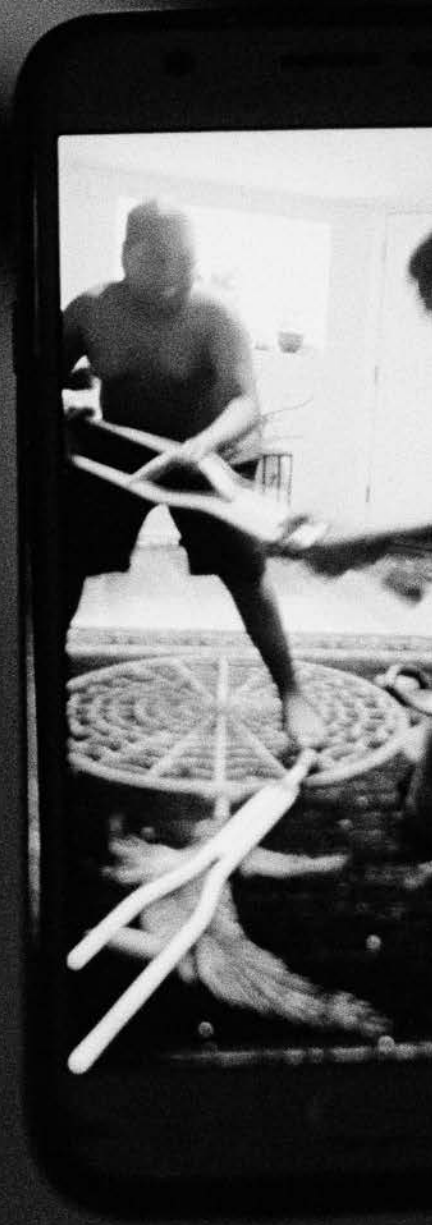




































*****Bonus Track*****

Sonnie Wooden

The house was near a landfill
The parents were fighting
The house was foreclosed
The parents were divorced
Father filed for bankruptcy

Chapter 13
We all had to start over

The makeshift candy store on aunties porch
Selling frooties
Now-n-laters
Pink ornate wafer cookies
And those big freeze popsicles that turned into a syrup like drink

We would sit on that porch for hours

The neighborhood kids would come by
The D-boys drove by
Crazy Dave took the trash out for a few dollars
Aunties daycare kids would help run the operation

It was all simpler back then
It was all so much more beautiful back then

When it was so hot niggas would crack a fire hydrant
And my father would ride straight through it
Looking over at me grinning
Saying, "This is how you get a quick car wash man!"

Those were the days
When Uncle Remus gave me the 6pc fried hard with mild sauce
And you slide that flimsy ass tray out and pull the white bread off
And there's lil bit of bread residue on the chicken
You bite that muthafucka and them juices are all over the corners of your mouth

...Those were the days I miss
While some days I learned too much

How my uncles were pimps
How my aunts were kingpins
How to discern between fireworks and gunshots

How my mother believes Black people are more like verbs
While white people are more like nouns

How my childhood sexual assaults rittled my body
Puncturing each orifice with guilt and shame

Making all of that beauty disintegrate
Forcing me to grow up

Making me hate where I'm from
But always wanting to come back