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## ***Mississippi Appendectomy***

**Heather Lynn Johnson, Artist/Poet**

*In 1961, without Fannie Lou Hamer's knowledge or consent, she was given a hysterectomy while in the hospital for minor surgery, a procedure so common it was known as a "Mississippi appendectomy."<sup>1</sup>*

Honey doused anger  
what you. took.  
draws blood if you not careful

I scream in whispers  
and hives of bees pour out my mouth  
for what's missing

The buzzing never done stopped  
Across cotton fields of hardened white buds  
Where there were once flowers  
That toughened up tender hands

In that space  
Where there once was  
A universe is passing

Me like cotton  
When cotton is ready  
To be picked

The flowers wilt and fall  
Leaving nothing but a hard brown boll  
That cracks open its shell to soft white fluff

This. my. Our. body.  
Becomes rough like the  
roots of hydrangea trees  
Filled with gnats and fruit flies  
The sign of a devil nearby

Spiny talons protected  
dollops of white dewy cotton  
A space where love will never grow  
Where you. I. Never grow

This. my. Our. body.  
swollen from the emptiness

In that space, a universe is passing  
1961 becomes now  
Like my fingers reaching into the cotton boll  
The gnarled knotty fists  
Reaching backward into the new

Of Miss...iss...sipp...eee  
Pound my. Our. This spirit down

Into the hollow  
You took  
Pinched like Mississippi cotton  
You took the cotton  
twisting up inside me

But I wasn't ready  
I was not.

I was  
To be picked  
Like flowers

Bees pour out my mouth  
To suckle at the breasts of  
Lilacs and Black-eyed Susans

Nibbling first at one then at another  
In this flower garden  
I could taste the afterbirth  
of the loss  
Like a laying on of the hands –  
Fannie Lou Hamer hands

Not doctors  
That pinched cotton  
From black brown yellow

Bodies free from bondage but  
Still for profit  
Came out missing

What you know about eyes  
Flecked with sprinkles of joy?  
Teared, missing the small kisses  
Falling on my neck like a  
breeze heavy with ocean

Instead of babies  
I birthed  
My anger  
Half carried and half dragged

My body.

From barren lands  
Tubes tied  
Like the roots of oaks and pines

Sisters, Mothers, Wives  
Trying to make something  
From this wood.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Rosalind Early, "The Sweat and Blood of Fannie Lou Hamer: How a Would-be Voter Became a Civil Rights Legend," *HUMANITIES: The Magazine of the National Endowment for the Humanities* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2021), <https://www.neh.gov/article/sweat-and-blood-fannie-lou-hamer>.