Lauren K. Watel

"Houses for the Heart to Live In": Finding a Home in the Work of Toi Derricotte

In the introduction to *The Black Notebooks* (1997), Toi Derricotte's powerful volume of nonfiction chronicling her struggles, both externally and internally, with race and racism, the poet asserts that her "book is about the search for a home, a safe home for all our complexities, our beauty and our abhorred life. It is about not finding a home in the world, and having to invent that home in language" (19). For Derricotte the notion of home in all its complex valences represents both the remembered (and misremembered) past—the places from which a person came, the places that formed her, the homes she did not find in the world—and also the hoped-for future—the places she wishes to go, the people she wishes to be, the homes she strives to construct in the act of writing. This ongoing search for a safe home can be said to constitute one of the driving forces behind Derricotte's entire artistic output, a passionate literary enterprise for which she has not yet received the full critical attention she most assuredly deserves. In a career spanning over forty years she has produced six gutsy, heartbreaking poetry collections and a brilliant book of nonfiction. Throughout this substantial body of work the idea of home has served as a key bedrock to which Derricotte continually returns and through which she relentlessly picks apart social issues, such as domesticity and motherhood, race and class, the female body, sexuality and the construction of the self. As an artist Derricotte also uses home to explore a range of literary concerns, including formal experimentation, generic boundaries, and modes of poetic address, most specifically the confessional.

Homes in the World

As the most basic manifestation of home, the house features prominently in Derricotte's work. One can read the house throughout the poet's oeuvre as an enabling structure operating in dual modes. First, the house functions as a literal structure, a residence, a street address, a physical abode with floors, ceilings, windows, doors, rooms, furniture. Ideally such a structure provides shelter for its inhabitants, but in Derricotte's work the house invariably enables imprisonment, danger and violence, even death—literal death as well as emotional and spiritual death. As a specific residence located in a specific neighborhood and city at a specific point in time the house also signifies aspects of its inhabitants' identity, such as race and class, and its interior demarcates gender divisions. Second, the house serves as a figurative structure, the household and its familial dynamics, which Derricotte sees as enabling an array of power imbalances in which the vulnerable are exploited by the more powerful, with the child at the bottom of the family hierarchy. These power imbalances shape a child's fundamental sense of herself, including her body—its boundaries, its relative worth, its growth and erotic development. One might even say that in Derricotte the house, both in its literal and metaphorical guises, creates the child's body in its own image.

Derricotte titles her 1978 debut volume of poetry *The Empress of the Death House*. From the start she links the house directly with death, in the form of Webster's Funeral Home, the realm over which the book's empress, the poet's paternal grandmother, reigns. The pointed substitution of "death house" for "funeral home" associates her grandmother's abode not only with the corpses embalmed and stored there but also with the building where death row inmates await execution. Because her grandmother "haunted the halls / above Webster's Funeral / Home like a red- / gowned ghost," it is as if she, too, is already dead inside that house (42). I would argue that it is not so much that the house is being haunted by the ghost in this poem but rather that the ghost

is haunted by being in the house, "haunted" in this instance defined as "displaying signs of mental torment." The house in Derricotte's work does not function as a romanticized, spooky edifice shrouded in mysteries, rife with uncanny disturbances or supernaturally possessed, the way it operates in the gothic tradition; rather, Derricotte's houses exist in the workaday world, in the light of day, containing secrets rather than mystery, concealing under their roofs clearly identifiable physical and emotional threats, abuses perpetuated by familiars and intimates.

Throughout the book Derricotte envisions the house as a prison or tomb, wives and mothers its prisoners or cadavers, the men their wardens and undertakers. In "doll poem" the eerie doll, trapped by stultifying domesticity in a coffin-like box, "is a good hausfrau / prepared for all necessities" and when you "ask her her name / and turn her over / she says, ma ma" (30-1). In a later poem entitled "Dolls," from *The Undertaker's Daughter* (2011), Derricotte similarly associates the infantilizing cultural norms of feminine beauty with dolls. The poet's mother dresses her "in pinafores & ruffled socks. Toi, she called me / as if I was supposed to stay small" (29). "sleeping with mr. death" posits the man of the house as the grim reaper himself, who is "all you are left with…when you have hung the keys on the wall" (13). The house as prison or tomb invariably engenders a destructive secrecy, which traps women in silence. The speaker of "the story of a very broken lady" asserts that "my house has become a secret," and that "nobody hears me / i talk & talk // the walls close over me" (15-6). Again, the house is envisioned as a prison within whose walls women feel not only trapped but also robbed of their ability to speak out about their imprisonment.

Nor can children escape the specter of death and secrecy that permeates the house. In "The Feeding" the speaker as a small child is taken to her grandmother's bed where, as Derricotte writes in a dramatic rhyming enjambment, "Maroon-quilted, eider-downed / I drowned" (43). In bed the grandmother suckles her granddaughter at "her wasted breast" and asks her to affirm that "she still had milk" (43). Nursing,

a physical and emotional connection meant to nurture an infant, is here transformed into an exercise of power over a small child. This performance of nursing is the grandmother's attempt both to usurp the maternal role and also to compel the grandchild to become the child, her own father, who nursed "til he was old enough to ask" (43). A fraught intimacy between grandmother and granddaughter is premised on a double "sapless" lie, the bodily lie of the milkless breast and the lie the child feels compelled to tell. At the end of the poem the absence of breast milk endures as an embodied emptiness the adult speaker can still paradoxically taste as a weight in her mouth.

Derricotte's second book of poems *natural birth* (1983, reissued 2000) tells the story of her pregnancy at nineteen, when she leaves her parents' home in Detroit to deliver her son in secret. While she waits for a space to open up in a home for unwed mothers in Kalamazoo, the narrator stays with a family, whose house she finds unsettlingly quiet ("no screaming in that house, no tears") and orderly in its domestic routines: "*set the table. clean the kitchen. vacuum*… / i dry dishes in the afternoon. watch her can apples from / the backyard, put them in the cellar to save for winter" (31, 29). Accustomed to the loud, chaotic houses of her childhood, Derricotte tries to imagine such a quiet house for herself but can't. Nor can she imagine embracing the domestic tasks required to maintain a household. "[H]ow will *my* house ever run on silence, when in me there / is such noise, such hatred for peeling apples, canning, / and waking to feed baby" (31). Though she feels accepted by the couple, she who is used to feeling judged and punished can't conceive of their kindness toward her—"why have they / asked for me? why am i in their house? why are they / doing this?"—and ultimately feels a stranger in their house (32).

When the narrator moves to a maternity ward for unwed mothers in a Catholic hospital, she once again finds herself in a "home" that feels far from homelike. On the contrary, this home is alienating and impersonal, "another world, ordered and white" (41). Within the walls of this home the

male authority figure, the doctor, takes control over vulnerable women in labor in order to medicalize what the writer imagines will be a "natural" experience of giving birth. Derricotte's language is blunt, visceral, as she describes how the "doctor comes in, wrenches his hand, a hammer up my cunt," his violent intrusions into her body a form of rape (45). She imagines that "he must be / happy because he is a man and in control of me and i / cannot move away from him while he takes me on this bed / of pain" (47). Again, male violence committed inside a space deemed a "home" engenders female silence: "*i want to / scream i can't. my mouth is stopped my mouth is dry*" (43). And like the bed in "The Feeding," the hospital bed becomes a space not for comfort or rest but for the exploitation of the vulnerable by the more powerful.

Derricotte's harrowing and unsentimental yet metaphorically inventive description of her labor and delivery also depicts a profound sense of bodily displacement and objectification: "the meat rolls up and moans on the damp table. / my body is a piece of cotton over another / woman's body" (51). Overwhelmed by intense pain and the doctor's brutality, the speaker experiences her body as a separate entity, the labor inducing a double consciousness, where the "i" becomes a disembodied self observing the body's excruciating effort: "i move with her like skin…i am just watching her, not able to believe what her / body can do, what it *will* do, to get this thing accomplished" (51). Estranged from the body, this free floating observing self (the "i" as subject) undergoes a series of transmutations in its relationship to the body (the "me" as object) as the labor progresses, from "i / grew deep / in me / like death" to "i was / over me / like sun" to the i that "could look / into myself / like one / dark eye" (66). Even after Derricotte delivers her baby and her breasts begin to fill, she feels alienated not only from her body, "a piece of limp meat without a soul," but also from her baby: "under her gown, the body of a stranger fed itself, sucked / moisture into her breasts" (79). Echoing her sense of herself both as a stranger in the couple's home and as a disassociated body in the home for unwed mothers, she now experiences her newborn

child as simply a body, the body of a stranger, and herself as "a dumb creature, numbly attending," the grueling labor and delivery ending not in joyous triumph but in exhausted numbness and silence (79). However, though the delivery chronicled in *natural birth* ends in numbness and silence, the book does not. The volume's final poem, "in knowledge of young boys," stresses the love and intimacy between mother and son, especially their bodily interconnection during his gestation.

Derricotte's third book *Captivity* (1989) not surprisingly posits the house as a place of imprisonment and danger, especially for women and children. "Christmas Eve: My Mother Dressing" depicts the one time of year Derricotte's mother was "not the slave of the house, the woman" (9). The young poet staring at "Aerial Photographs Before the Atomic Bomb" in *Life* magazine imagines the weapon's destructive power in terms of her house: "This was a heat / I had felt already in our house on Norwood" (15). In "The Minks" Derricotte describes the hundreds of cages in which her uncle raised minks as "their wooden houses" and equates these cages with her own house, the soon-to-be-skinned minks with her imperiled family: "My uncle would lift the roof like a god / who might lift our roof, look down on us / and take us out to safety" (3). The speaker's mother in the prose poem "Abuse" welcomes a sexual predator into the house. "Mama, the janitor is coming in the house and wants to feel me. Well, come here, come see the janitor and say hello. I come in a starched pinafore and she stands at the foot of the stairs as if she is proud" (18). Time and again in Derricotte's work the house is a precarious, compromised space in which powerful males exercise authority without restraint over less powerful females.

In "Poem for My Father" the house serves as a backdrop for the physical and emotional abuse the poet and her mother suffer at the hands of her father. The house's very geography maps a series of painful incidents: "would you hang your coat in the closet without saying hello," "would you carry me up the stairs by my hair so that my feet never touch bottom," "would you beat [my mother] in a corner of

the kitchen / while i am in the bathroom trying to bury my head underwater," "would you sleep…in the bed next to me… would you come on the sheet while i am sleeping. later i look for the spot" (6-7). The violence perpetrated inside the house enshrines the father as a Godlike figure, "the maker / of my heaven and my hell" with the power to confer both love and suffering upon his child (6). In addition, abuse imprints the daughter's body with the paternal body, so that by the end of the poem the speaker feels as if she has inherited and internalized some essence from her father, "whose sperm swims in my veins" (8). "Abuse" features a house where "[e]verything's neatly in place…but the walls are coming apart…and the little girl is wiped across the floor like a flour sack" (18). Here the house, both as physical and familial structure, is deteriorating despite appearances, the child bearing the brunt of this disintegration. "She is decorated by love. Her legs have stripes from beating" (18). The father's abuse, inscribed on the daughter's body, leaves not only a psychological but a physical legacy as well.

Even as Derricotte's houses fail to shield women from domineering men, and children from abusive adults, the family residence also stands as a defining symbol of racial and class status. In "The House on Norwood" the family has moved to Conant Gardens, a prosperous African American Detroit suburb, which represents black middle-class respectability. "That brick bungalow / rose out of the storm / of racism like an ark" (11). Here Derricotte's use of biblical imagery likens the house to a sturdy, even sanctified vessel built to protect the family from the devastation created by racial prejudice. On drives to "Blackbottom," a neighborhood on the Near East Side of Detroit hard hit during the Depression and afterwards, the poet's family revels in its newfound class superiority. "Freshly escaped, black middle class, / we snickered, and were proud; / the louder the streets, the prouder" (5). But the move to the salvific house in the suburbs comes with a cost: "We had lost our voice in the suburbs, in Conant Gardens, / where each brick house delineated a fence of silence" (5). The distance they must put between themselves

and lower-class life, combined with suburban isolation and the pressure of keeping up middle-class pretenses, engender yet another kind of silence. The first line of "The Struggle"—"We didn't want to be white—or did we?"—interrogates the motivation behind the family's daily domestic exertions (21). The speaker repeatedly asks, "What did we want?" As if in answer she writes, "As the furniture became modern, the carpet deep, the white / ballerina on the mantel lifted her arms like some girl near / terror" (21). The poet depicts the renovations and improvements to the house as manifestations of their social and racial striving, the making and spending of money a fierce defense against their recent departure from economic hardship, the white ballerina fearful of their progress.

In the second chapter of *The Black Notebooks* Derricotte and her husband search for a house within commuting distance of New York City. As they drive through "*blocks and blocks of stately colonials and overpowering elms*," Derricotte imagines "*a kind of life, a kind of happiness—a light on in an upstairs bedroom, a tricycle turned over in a drive, a swing on a front porch barely moving, as if it were just waiting for someone to come and sit down…. I wanted to be in those houses, to be those people*" (31). Inhabiting such a house represents a dream of a suburban idyll, a social escape/arrival. However, their search for a house quickly reveals how race inflects every aspect of selecting, buying, and inhabiting it. If Derricotte and her darker-skinned husband go house hunting together, agents show them more expensive, more run-down houses in black or integrated neighborhoods. Therefore, Derricotte decides to look at houses without her husband, whom she brings back late at night. When they finally buy in a white neighborhood, the house from the outside looks as though it will confer the happiness embodied in the houses of her fantasies. "When I come home late, I notice our bedroom windows mildly lit, just like the windows of the house next door" (45). However, once settled in the house Derricotte finds herself "inescapably weighted and bound by race… the known 'black' person" (13). A series of racist incidents, including the discovery that the local country club excludes

black people, makes her feel isolated—"It's the loneliness I can't take, the way the house stuffs up with it like a head that can't breathe"—and distorts her perceptions of the house, which becomes nightmarish, "so large it never ends," a space unfit, unsafe, like the houses of her childhood (44-5). "Oh boiler in the basement, red eye of some miserable housewife, or some child locked in the basement with spiders" (45). Eventually Derricotte and her husband move to another white community, where they purposely choose a house from which she can see no other houses, thus forgoing not only the threat of renewed racial tensions but also the possibility of neighborhood friendships.

The deceptively simple six-line title poem of Derricotte's 1997 collection *Tender* encapsulates the multiple resonances of the house in her work. The poem's first enjambment—"The tenderest meat / comes from the houses"—identifies the houses in this poem as slaughterhouses and therefore immediately links the house with death (1). The next enjambment—"comes from the houses / where you hear the least"—evokes the obliterating silence inside these houses. As the poem progresses with a skillful, haunting enjambment between its two stanzas—"where you hear the least // squealing. The secret"—silence transforms into squealing, which is associated by lineal proximity with secrecy. The poem continues with "The secret / is to give a little." In the isolated second line of this pairing "give" acts as an intransitive verb, which one could read either as "provide" or "yield." However, the poem's final, devastating enjambment—"is to give a little / wine before killing" turns "give" into a transitive verb with wine as its object and modified by "before killing." Reminiscent of the extended analogy in "The Minks" whereby the minks in their houses are seen as analogous of the family members in their house, the meat of the first line of "Tender" can be read as referring to animals and humans, both of whom await violence inside their respective houses, slaughterhouses, and the houses of childhood. This dual meaning of house also recalls the death house of Derricotte's first book, which signified both funeral home/death row and

her grandmother's residence. That the meat of the first line is "the tenderest" subtly evokes the fact that one tenderizes meat by beating it or by overfeeding and severely restricting the movement of the young animals meant for slaughter. The language of the body as meat is also reminiscent of lines from "natural birth," in which the laboring female body is likened to meat, objectified and subjected to violence by the doctor in charge. Especially in the context of Derricotte's work as a whole, the poem begs to be read as a kind of allegory, a horrifying, ironic instruction manual addressed to an abuser who wants to soften up a victim before committing acts of violence, whether physical or emotional.

Derricotte continues to depict the house in *Tender* as a place that fails to offer the safety and shelter it was built to provide. In a series of poems entitled "Exits from Elmina Castle: Cape Coast, Ghana" the speaker tours the castle, which for three centuries functioned as a temporary detention site for Africans captured to be exported as chattel. "Above Elmina" sits a chapel, whose entrance lintel is "carved with news: / *This is the house of God*" (8). Here the church becomes yet another house where suffering is ignored and succor withheld. Derricotte's ironic use of "news" calls to mind the "good news" of salvation, which in many countries, including America, would be preached to slaves to reinforce and sanction their servitude. The role of the Catholic church in Derricotte's work, especially regarding the authority of the clergy and its fraught take on sexuality, not to mention her multiple uses of biblical imagery and language, is a rich subject beyond the scope of this discussion and deserving of an essay of its own. Taking into account Derricotte's complicated relationship to the church—she had an early ambition to become a nun—one might easily read the wine in the poem "Tender" as communion wine and the "houses" as houses of God, within whose literal and metaphorical walls multiple victims suffer abuse at the hands of priests, so-called "Fathers" to the trusting parishioners under their care.

"When My Father Was Beating Me" begins with the speaker hearing the surprisingly normal domestic sounds

of her mother working in the kitchen, as her father beats her. "Perhaps the house was cut in two by a membrane," she speculates, "and, though her sounds could come to my ears, my screams and cries and whimpers, his demands and humiliations, the sounds of his hands hitting my body, couldn't pierce back the other way" (13). The young speaker must posit a fantastical architectural feature for the house to explain her mother's inaction in the face of her father's abuse. In "Family Secrets" a lighter-skinned cousin marries a young man whose skin, in another marvelous Derricottean enjambment-reversal, was so dark it was "as if he / had been washed in what we wanted / to wipe off our hands" (21). The disgrace of this elopement, to a man with the wrong shade of skin and the wrong kind of family, is expressed metonymically by the house itself: "The night they eloped to the Gotham Hotel, / the whole house whispered—as if we were ashamed / to tell it to ourselves" (21). "Dead Baby Speaks" presents a dramatic monologue from the point of view of a speaker Derricotte calls "Dead Baby," who seems to represent the poet's lost self, speaking to and about her mother from the grave of childhood. "i could live in her house with her sickness like a stinking body in the stairwell…i could bake bread until my hands puff off…i could be cut up and served on her table…i could clean house until it is empty" (49-50). Derricotte once more imagines the house as tomblike or death-filled, her mother like a corpse inside it, her own body as meat, and the domestic chores required for the house's upkeep as destructive of the female body and psyche.

The cover of *The Undertaker's Daughter*, Derricotte's fifth book of poetry, features a photograph of the poet's father uneasily holding his infant daughter, the pair posed in front of a house. "Above my father's head, you can see the window in the one large finished area of the attic where we lived, a door and thin wall away from bare wood beams and summer's blistering heat…in tenderness and violence, he is a novice, a beginner, a baby" (89). This description in the poem "The undertaking" subtly compares her house, where only "a door and thin wall" separate habitable from uninhabitable

space, with her father, in whom "tenderness and violence" are likewise separated by tenuous barriers. In "Burial sites" Derricotte writes, "Life is something you have to get used to: what is normal in a house, the bottom line, what is taken for granted" (11). What is normal in the young speaker's house are scenes of ordinary domesticity—her mother cleaning and shopping, the layout of the house, the location of various beds—interwoven with episodes of paternal abuse. Throughout the piece, beds—like the grandmother's bed in "The Feeding," the hospital bed in *natural birth*, and the bed she shares with her father in "Poem for My Father"—are spaces where the speaker encounters fear, exploitation and pain; in fact, "Burial sites" originally appeared under the title "Beds," so that the beds in the poem can also be read as metaphorical graves. In *The Black Notebooks* Derricotte also uses the image of the bed to portray how people carry burdens from the past: "We feel the painful wounds of history in our parents' bed" (21). Section XXIV of "Burial sites" conceives of her father's abuse in terms of the layout of their house and the domestic effort to maintain it. "The living room was off limits…. I guess he chose rooms to beat me in honor of the sacrifices my mother had made to make our home beautiful" (17). As in many of Derricotte's poems featuring a house, the house in this sequence holds an oppressive silence produced by a corrosive familial dynamic, under which the child uniquely suffers. "Sometimes, they wouldn't speak even to me when we were in the house together, as if we had to be quiet, like in church, and respect their hatred for each other" (13). Derricotte here compares the church, again evoking the house of God, with her childhood house where, in a stark reversal of Christ's exhortation in John 13: 34-35 to "Love one another," the family abides by the implicit mandate to "Hate one another."

Derricotte sees the violence that occurred inside the houses of her childhood as constitutive of her notion of herself, including how she lives in and experiences her own body. "The body holds memories," she says in "The undertaking" (86). The sequence "Burial sites" is in part a chronicle of a

father's campaign to establish himself as a divine figure with supernatural powers—"he could see inside me. He could tell my moods"—for the purpose of conquering his daughter and remaking her into himself (13). The abuse he inflicts upon her and the power imbalance he exploits to do so blur the boundaries between paternal and filial selves, so that the poet struggles to conceive of her body as separate from her father's body, her thoughts as separate from her father's thoughts. "He was the ruler of my body. I had to learn that. He had to be deep in me, deeper than instinct, like a commander of a submarine during times of war" (6). "I was trapped in what my father thought I was thinking. I couldn't think. My thinking disappeared in case it was the wrong thought" (7). Eventually the boundaries blur so thoroughly they disappear. "I had to take that voice in, become my father, the judge referred to before any dangerous self-assertion, any thought or feeling" (7-8). (Here Derricotte pointedly draws on the language of patriarchal institutional hierarchies—military and judicial—as metaphors for her father's power over her.) Daughter becomes father, father becomes daughter, so that even much later in life the father remains internalized in the adult daughter's body. In "When the goddess makes love to me" a lover "has to pass through my father / she has to find him / where he sits in a corner inside me" (64). The fascinatingly complex relationships between family intimacies and withholdings, the eroticized developing female body, gender fluidity, adult sexuality and sexual orientation, and bodily re/discovery in Derricotte's work also merit a separate essay. "The undertaking" depicts the knee-jerk terror an abused child can feel at any moment, the inescapable fusion of the abuser's body with her own. "At some point something happens…and, in less than a second, your stomach tightens like a grill. Alarm bells ring in the amygdala: Daddy's home" (86). Note the ingenious, eerie pun of "Daddy's home," which can be read in multiple ways: as "the home belonging to Daddy"; as "Daddy is here in the house"; as "Daddy is where I belong"; and, even more heartbreaking, as "Daddy is where he belongs, inside my body."

Homes in Language

As Derricotte repeatedly testifies in book after book, one of the most subtle and insidious consequences of the violent dynamics operating within the homes that populate her work—the house on Norwood, the bungalow on the cover of *The Undertaker's Daughter*, the minks' houses, the House of God, the slaughterhouse, death house, funeral home, home for unwed mothers—is silence. Silence turns the very purpose of a home, to protect its inhabitants by preventing exterior threats from getting inside, against itself; consequently, silence allows the home to imperil its most vulnerable inhabitants by preventing interior threats from getting outside, from being spoken. Abuses are kept secret, internalized rather than named and acknowledged, intimacies withheld. The silence maintained in the house, and the cruelties silence conceals, become the child's mother tongue. Or, in Derricotte's case, her father tongue. "So many silences in our house, so much we did that no one spoke about or volunteered to explain, as if we never depended on language. We seemed trapped in a languageless world" (*Notebooks* 54). Not surprisingly, then, it is language itself that becomes the necessary material out of which Derricotte seeks to fashion new homes that, by breaking through the silence, will offer her shelter. "It was language," she writes in *The Black Notebooks*, "that saved my life" (22).

Derricotte the writer can therefore also be seen as both Derricotte the architect and Derricotte the builder. Given the urgency of her project, to create safe homes in language, Derricotte has consistently approached their design and construction with a ranging sense of freedom and a radical openness, both denied her in the homes where she lived and tried to thrive. As one formal expression of this freedom, early in her career she began exploring the generic boundaries between poetry and prose. "When I wrote it," she says of the manuscript of *natural birth*, "I couldn't figure out what it was, prose or poetry" (18-9). She describes her consternation and confusion over the book's form as "another kind of silence," which led her to bury the manuscript in a drawer for two

years (18). Ultimately, Derricotte decides to eschew a single literary mode in favor of hybridity, and the book becomes a fluid melding of poetry and prose. This push against the confines of traditional generic categorization leads her inevitably to the formal experimentation that characterizes her work as a whole. For example, throughout *natural birth*, as in all her books, Derricotte experiments with a wide variety of formal tools in order both to accommodate and to express a wide range of experience, both physical and emotional, and she often switches registers to capture subtle distinctions between the two. She uses stanzas of long, loose, proselike lines for the more descriptive, narrative sections of the book. Typographically these stanzas depict something of the chaos and uncertainty of this teenager giving birth alone away from home, with their lack of capitals at the beginning of sentences, their use of "i" for the first person pronoun, as well as their intermittent italics and all caps. Derricotte alternates these longer-line stanzas with stanzas of extremely short, impressionistic lines to portray the most intense moments of her transition and delivery. The latter segments, visually very stark on the page, almost like concrete poetry, convey an expansion of time, a shift in perspective to an acute interiority, a series of snapshots of the poet's immersion in pain and the exertion of the delivery. For instance, in a deft, unexpected formal move, after the baby's head crowns and a random medical professional peers through the door of the room and asks the patient's name, the poem instantly goes off kilter:

> a head
> coming through
> the door.
> NAME PLEASE/
> PLEASE/NAME/whose
>
> head/i
> don't know/some
> disconnection
>
> NAME PLEASE/ (70)

Here Derricotte marshals disruptions in typography, grammar, punctuation and spacing to convey the speaker's estrangement and displacement and, literally, to interrupt the flow of the poem, just as the bureaucrat interrupts the flow of the delivery.

One need only page through each of Derricotte's volumes to get a sense of her commitment to formal freedom and her resistance to poetic boundaries of all sorts, as she relentlessly constructs different edifices in language. Long narrative lines intermingle with short lyric lines, paragraphs with lineated stanzas, poems of regularized stanzas with poems of irregular stanza lengths, stanzaic poems with stichic, whole words with abbreviations and foreshortenings, capitals with lowercase, "I" with "i," "and" with "&," italics with plain text, punctuated lines with no punctuation. Poems range over the page in expressive lineation, white space often speaking as vehemently as text. See, for example, in "poem no. 1" from *The Empress of the Death House* where a single standard-length line breaks to a series of shorter lines teetering into a stair-step, the first line jutting out over the stanza like a diving board or a plank over water:

> the man wants more than love
> he wants
> every oz.
> of juice
> yr body
> is capable
> of secreting (38)

Often these formal shifts occur at moments of maximum emotional pressure—the excerpt above describes a master who raped and impregnated the poet's enslaved ancestor—as if Derricotte the builder is moving the walls of the poetic house to make room for the forces of feeling, for the devastating revelations contained inside. One could rightly characterize Derricotte's handling of formal elements as loose, wild, heated, adventuresome, but her moves are far from random;

rather, Derricotte the architect is making intentional choices on behalf of her houses' designs, even and especially when she means for their structures to express rawness, rage, pain, fragmentation, disruption, disintegration.

Derricotte also uses subtle formal shifts to indicate a change in register within a poem. "Poem for My Father" begins with three simple stanzas with short or medium-length declarative lines in the past tense, each containing conventional capitalization and punctuation, each end-stopped with a period or comma, the speaker represented by "I" in the poem's second line. At the end of the third stanza the poet declares, "You walked in your body like a living man. / But you were not" (*Captivity* 6). Following this grim assessment of her father, each line in the poem's fourth stanza begins without capitalization and ends without punctuation, the lines lengthen, at times exceeding the width of the page, "I" becomes "i," the past tense the conditional, the declarations implicit questions, as if suddenly a child speaker were interrupting the adult speaker who had authored the first three stanzas. The poem continues this way in a propulsive litany of questions/conditionals the child poses to her father about his past abuses, those he inflicted and those he suffered, this recitation ending after two and a half pages in the poem's single, damning question mark. The poem then returns to traditional punctuation and capitalization in a dramatic final pair of one-line, end-stopped, rhyming stanzas: "Old man whose sperm swims in my veins, // come back in love, come back in pain" (8). With this shift the adult speaker also returns to the poem. Because of the intervening litany by the child speaker, the adult speaker can confront her father in all his troubled complexity, so that the poem ends on a poignant exhortation for the man who was not living in his body to live again in mind.

Generic and formal amalgamations appear throughout Derricotte's other books, as well. The poet explicitly structures *Tender* as a non-linear work with the title poem at its center. The book's seven sections, which attest to different forms of cruelty and attempts to redeem that cruelty, orbit

around this short lyric and its stark intimations of violence against a captive target. These poems again display a full range of stanzaic, linear, typographical, spatial, grammatical and generic experimentation. *The Black Notebooks*, Derricotte's work of nonfiction, also defies precise categorization, combining memoir, journal, essay, social commentary and self-interrogation. The book contains diary entries, personal and philosophical musings, folk rhyme, excerpts from a book authored by her mother, recipes, and a student's poem, among its various formal elements. In *The Undertaker's Daughter* Derricotte continues probing the boundaries between poetry and prose, especially in the spectacular and devastating piece "Burial sites," which one could describe as both a sequence of prose poems and a lyric essay in prose fragments. This, her fifth book, could be said to represent the poet's most developed and controlled deployment of diverse formal elements, as well as her most emotionally complex. The last section of the book's final poem, "The undertaking," a wonderful, redemptive play on "the undertaker," describes and enacts the transformative process of constructing a safe home in language, as the act of writing the poem changes the writer. The poem's lines flow organically: "*the poem is change*" becomes "*to be changed by the poem*" becomes "*to change by writing the poem*" becomes "*to write through the change*" becomes, in the end, "*to hold the writing / to hold the change / to hold it // & let it go*" (90).

In addition to the generic and formal freedoms Derricotte employs in the designs of her homes in language, she is fiercely committed to an uncompromising openness in their construction. Exposing episodes and emotions formerly kept quiet, kept secret, constitutes Derricotte's principal endeavor, her greatest obsession, her vocation. The exigency of naming the unnamed, of speaking over and against silences, of revealing wrongs committed in private and making them public, leads her not surprisingly to the confessional as a key mode of address in her work. The title of the leadoff poem of *The Undertaker's Daughter*, "I am not afraid to be memoir," affirms the poet's determination to plumb her autobiographi-

cal depths in the manner of the confessional. In proclaiming that she is "not afraid," she begins this volume on a bold, one might even say defiant note, not only declaring her intention to represent, and be, herself, but also seeming to signal an awareness of the memoir/confessional's compromised reputation in literary circles. Accused of gratuitous lurid revelations and solipsistic spectacle, the confessional has become an undervalued literary category, sneered at for its emotional excesses by the hip, the ironic, and the cerebral. Also implicitly contributing to the mode's belittled status is the predominant material of the confessional, the private, domestic sphere, often the house itself, deemed the province of the feminine, small, ordinary, and therefore less important, less monumental, less relevant than "larger" more "public" (read masculine) concerns. One might argue that literary derision toward the confessional has constituted a subtle institutional silencing, which discourages writers from tackling the private power imbalances, often gendered, often inflected by race and class and age, that Derricotte seeks to expose.

One early, influential model of the confessional is the work of Sylvia Plath, whose "Daddy" Derricotte encountered at age twenty-seven in her first workshop. She describes herself as "shocked and profoundly awakened" by the fact that a "poem could not only hold an unspeakable truth, it could also bring forth the very voice that had been put down, it could bring it to life" (*Daughter*, 87). In a piece from *The Empress of the Death House* Derricotte addresses a series of questions to another precursor, Anne Sexton. One of these envisions Sexton's poems as a hearth fire burning in her house. "One night did you come home / to toast your toes in front of them / & did they leave you cold" (47). In her answer, the speaker-as-Sexton attests to poetry's power to revive that which has died: "but when the time came, nothing could stop me, I tell you: // I made a living of my death" (48). From Plath, Sexton, and others Derricotte comes to embrace the confessional poem's resurrectional potential, to bring to the page voices that, as Derricotte puts it, using the parlance of animal euthanasia and suppressed rebellion, have been "put down." Further-

more, the confessional allows these voices not just to utter that which has been kept silent but, more specifically and crucially, to proclaim the "unspeakable truth." Speaking the truth is arguably Derricotte's most pressing concern as a poet. In composing *The Black Notebooks* she relates her desire "to tell the truth, however painful," as well as her conviction that "an honest confession would have merit" (141). She asserts that "one of my biggest strengths as a writer, perhaps the only really unique thing I can give, is that I am determined to tell the truth…. I keep telling the truth even when it is abhorrent" (184). In our current era Derricotte's dogged insistence on rooting out and voicing the truth seems a heroic undertaking, a much needed counterbalance to a culture of alternative facts, fake news, bullshit refined to an art, Russian-sponsored bots posed as people, and Twitter falsehoods passing for policy.

Following "I am not afraid to be memoir" with the lyric essay "Burial sites," Derricotte seems at first glance to inhabit fairly standard confessional territory: the piece is clearly an autobiographical work, written in narrative prose in the first person, set in the house, with a cast of familial characters and a steely recitation of abuse and trauma. However, a closer look reveals a characteristic twist: in two places the poet adds commentary in italics, observations about her own observations. One occurs in the Afterword:

I hear in myself a slight opposition, a wounded presence saying, I am me, I know who I am. But I am left with only a narrow hole, a thin tube of rubber that the words must squeak through. Where words might have gushed out as from a struck well, now, instead, I watch it—watch every thought. It wasn't my father's thought that I took in; it was his language. It is the language in me that must change (21).

This "I" as a self-observer, self-interrogator—"most of the time I am my own watcher"—is a distinguishing feature of Derricotte's particular strain of the confession (*Notebooks* 169). The poet scrutinizing her own thoughts and reflecting critically on her own voice speaking in and through the poem is representative of her impulse not only to speak unspoken

truths but, more urgently, to speak the most deeply repressed, shameful truths *about herself*. "I think that most people protect themselves…by not quite facing the worst," she says in *The Black Notebooks* (184). "On the contrary, I go searching for it. Especially in myself…. I have a drive to break the secrets, because I think that what we don't tell others, we often lie to ourselves about. I am determined not to lie to myself" (184). As an artist Derricotte intentionally sets out "to record the language of self-hate," which depends "on clarity—not only clarity in form and language, but clarity in embodying our human nature, our 'truth'" (16, 19). Her concept of truth is not capital "T" Truth, a grand destination one arrives at in order to put away one's baggage, but "truth" between quotes, the travel itself, which takes one through ever-changing landscapes that continually transform the traveler.

Derricotte's willingness—one might even say her compulsion—to ferret out the secret shames about herself is everywhere present in her poetry but most fully, explicitly, and courageously articulated in *The Black Notebooks*. Decades ahead of its time, this formally inventive, intensely personal, blistering yet tenderhearted investigation of race chronicles multiple instances of overt racism, as well as the subtle wounding presumptions that would eventually come to be known as micro-aggressions. Even as she expresses rightful outrage at these incidents, which point to the insidious ways that racism saturates even the most commonplace interactions, she nevertheless insists on self-interrogation and accountability. "Over and over I face the wall, the way in which I must confront my own complicity" (65). For example, when Derricotte checks her years-old memories of some of these racist incidents against accounts of those same episodes she had written shortly after they occurred, she discovers that she has misremembered them as worse than they were. "*So that once again I doubt my ability to remember the 'truth,' 'reality,' and think that much of my memory must be resonant with a deep need to see myself as victim. I think that memory… is in the service of the deepest psychic need*" (21). This self-suspicion, self-probing, and self-revelation leads Derricotte

to interrogate victimhood as a category, to investigate what she sees as her own tendency to feel victimized, and to refuse to rely unthinkingly on her own memories, opinions, and assumptions. Such startling disclosures never undercut the damning power of her descriptions of the racist incidents she suffers. Rather, her continual self-questioning makes her an eminently trustworthy narrator and witness. Derricotte regards her decision to hold herself accountable in a similar light: "My negative self-conception made me trust myself more than writers whose descriptions of racism are testimonies of their own innocence. I have always distrusted that, both from whites and blacks" (141). Rather than merely accuse others, Derricotte first accuses herself, always fighting to overcome her fear that her revelations will be misconstrued by white people or make her vulnerable to harsh judgments from people of color.

As a light-skinned woman of color Derricotte straddles these two worlds, black and white, dwelling comfortably in neither and forever having to negotiate this fraught liminal territory. "My skin color causes certain problems continuously, problems that open the issue of racism over and over like a wound. These openings are occasions for reexamination. My skin keeps things, literally, from being either black or white" (141). Her commitment to such reexaminations compels her to scrutinize her state of interraciality from many different angles, including that of relative privilege. "Light skin gives me such privileges that my complaints are not worthy. I'm not 'positive' enough. Not 'black' enough. I'm not a 'real' black person" (64). Possessing a skin color at variance with her historical and felt identity constitutes a persistent barrier-to-acceptance between the poet and the group she claims as her own. "Oh my people, / sometimes you look at me / with such unwillingness— / as I look at *you*!" (*Tender* 22). In the poem "A Note on My Son's Face" she writes, "I remembered how, an infant, his face was too dark, / nose too broad, mouth too wide…. I wanted that face to die, / to be reborn in the face of a white child" (*Captivity* 66-7). Here Derricotte admits to harboring internalized racist assumptions, which consider

light skin and certain "white" facial features as the implicit norm, against which dark skin and "black" facial features are deemed inferior. Similar self-indicting admissions, often brutally candid, frequently occur in Derricotte's work and breathe life into the confessional by saying, in effect, "If I can admit this about myself and survive, so can you." As a result, her work stands not just as an indictment of racist attitudes and actions but also, and even more importantly, as an invitation to readers to examine their own complicity, their own assumptions and privileges.

This relentless self-examination is for Derricotte a painful but vital ongoing practice that makes growth of the self possible. Indeed, the self-under-scrutiny comprises the heart of Derricotte's project. In a direct rebuke to T. S. Eliot's brand of self-disguising modernism Derricotte declares that "not acknowledging the self, pretending there is no self, or only a thread of self, one portrays falsely" (*Notebooks* 131). She links the struggle of artistic creation, "especially for a black writer," as necessarily integrated with a concurrent struggle entailing "the re-creation and revision of the self," because "racism's most damaging insult is internal, to 'self' as perception" (20). Derricotte likewise sees the process of discovering and acknowledging her own complicity as "an act of destruction of the self, an undoing of the self's protection" (65). In this view, the self's very making consists of its continual unmaking and remaking, so that the self becomes a loose, ever-shifting coherency that is always in process, always open to change. In the hands of Derricotte, the confessional as poetic practice can therefore be seen not as solipsistic or self-*serv*ing but as *self*-serving—that is, in service to the development, the healing, the breaking down and building up, the reinventing and reinvigorating of the self.

The development of the self in Derricotte's work continues in her latest book, which, not surprisingly, she calls *I: New and Selected Poems*. As a summary statement of her career thus far, this title "I" can be seen as representing an unabashed embrace of the lyric "I," which in the history of poetry has often served as a powerful instrument enabling

the poet to communicate an impression of unmediated personal experience, facilitate intimacy between speaker and reader, and give voice to the unspoken and repressed. More importantly, this "I" also represents a homecoming for Derricotte, an arrival into the self, the mature "I" of self-love earned through experience, an "I" joyfully expressed and expressing itself in her new poems. In "Midnight: Long Train Passing" the poet in childhood is consoled by the roar of a distant train, which she likens to "another person, another body" and a language, like the language of poetry, a dream of escape from the fear that she was unworthy. "I was not," she concludes, signaling the adult "I's" retrospective acceptance of her former self-doubt. "Instead / there was another self I lived in, like a God / I prayed to by staying alive." This surprising final enjambment posits survival as a form of prayer, the alternative self a deity that makes survival possible.

This conception of a split self, the self-appraising "I" that separates from the wounded "I," the "I" of strength and hope and healing, appears again in "Pantoum for the Broken." The poem, which rewards multiple readings, evokes the experience and the aftermath of being sexually assaulted through the interweaving pantoum form, brokenness coming and going in waves as the poem progresses. Given the poem's sensitive subject matter, Derricotte deftly achieves a tone both understated and powerful, especially with her subtle, haunting play on key words that highlight the vulnerability of victims of sexual assault, who keep their brokenness secret. For instance, the "fingered" of the poem's first line "How many of us were fingered?" could refer both to being penetrated by a finger and also to being chosen or singled out by an abuser. Similarly, Derricotte follows the second occurrence of the line "I forget how many times I was broken" with the line "Someone faceless rolled on me like a horse," which retrospectively expands the meanings of "broken" (damaged) and "breaking in" (interrupting, illegally entering), calling to mind the breaking of a horse, taming its wild spirit, making it amenable to being ridden or driven.

The poem strictly adheres to the pantoum form until

the penultimate stanza, where the "I" in the last line of the previous stanza—"Sleepwalking, I go back to where it happens"—becomes "we" in the line's repetition in the following stanza. This deliberate change in pronoun signals the writer's imprint on the pantoum form as she makes it her own, and it also highlights the "I's" fluid transformation into the "we" of the shared experience of trauma. In the last stanza Derricotte chooses to stray even further from the pantoum form, replacing an entire line. "We don't know when or why or who broke in" becomes "If we escaped, will we escape again?" This rhyming substitution brings escape into the poem in the place of not-knowing, question in the place of statement. The next line, "I leapt from my body like a burning thing," suggests the "I's" escape from the damaged self, a leap to save the self from destruction. Rather than importing the line "Not wanting to go back, we make it happen" unchanged from the penultimate to the last stanza, Derricotte changes the line to "Not wanting to go back, I make it happen." Here the agency of the "I" returns, the "I" who escaped, the "I" who in the poem's concluding line—"Until I hold the broken one, hold her and sing"—can console the "I" who is broken and burning. The "I" who sings can also be read as the poet, so that the poem itself, the song, becomes a vessel to hold the brokenness, this beautiful and moving image representative not only of the "I" of this poem but the "I" of the book as a whole, which charts Derricotte's lifelong and ultimately successful struggle to inhabit this nurturing, singing "I."

Because the ever evolving "I" of the poet stands at the heart of Derricotte's literary project, she was not content just to nurture herself as a poet but wanted to nurture others, to give them a safe home, as well. To that end, along with Cornelius Eady she established the Cave Canem Foundation, which since its inception in 1996 has championed countless African American poets. Given the importance of home for Derricotte, it makes perfect sense that the motto of this influential cultural institution is "a home for black poetry." With its commitment to "cultivating the artistic and professional growth of African American poets" and providing a "productive space

for writing without fear of censure," Cave Canem embodies Derricotte's dedication to the poet's exploration of the self, to the growth and freedom of the self through language and in the world.

Ultimately the self, for better or worse, in all its complexity and its elusive, fluctuating turmoil, is a person's first and most elemental home. In order to be "at home" in herself, Toi Derricotte became a poet. "I hear a pen scratch // a paper. There is some idea / I think is clever: I want to // capture myself in a book" (*Tender* 35). From the alienation and pain she suffered inside her many homes in the world, which left her vulnerable and exposed her to danger, she painstakingly constructed beautiful, robust homes in language, which protected her and provided her with shelter. Significantly, she conceives of these homes, these voices brought to life, these truths brought to light, these selves undone and remade time and again, whatever their form, as poems. "Then aren't these square boxes on paper," she asks of the paragraphs in *The Black Notebooks*, "not prose, but poems, houses for the heart to live in?" (19).