



**“Grandmother’s Dream Housetop”**  
9 Block, 173 Haiku Variation with Multiple Borders  
Rachel Chapman

Ekphrastic poem  
Gathered from all my searching  
Let the light come in

We feature *Housetop* -  
a *Nine-Block Variation*  
From the permanent

Extend this invite  
Help expand upon the themes  
Layered in *Housetop*

Your contribution  
If you are interested  
Your voice alongside

Women from Gee's Bend  
Geographically remote  
Descended, mostly

*Housetop* has reigned queen  
Gee's Bend most favored pattern  
Mesmerized inspired

Born of scarcity  
Called for inventive salvage  
Fabric scraps, remnants

Jagged jigsaw piece  
Tossed about the room I saw  
My grandma sweeping

With her old straw broom  
Didn't know what she's doing  
Hardly understand

Hardly understand  
She was really sweeping up  
Pieces of a man

Only three colors  
In concentric formation  
She pieced blocks fabric

Lives marked by seasons  
Palette of blood, sweat and tears  
Tangible record

Daddy met the mail  
Heard the mailman say don't take  
This letter to heart

Jimmy, they've laid off  
Nine others today, but he  
Didn't know he could

Hardly understand  
He was only talking to  
Pieces of a man

All around simple  
Hosts many experiments  
Formal reduction

I hear sounds sirens  
Come knifing through the dark gloom  
What are they doing?

Hardly understand  
That they're only arresting  
Pieces of a man

Arrest the changes  
Debris from the packaging  
Museum treatment

Four people moving  
Carefully in unison  
Museum object

A museum piece  
Not casual but not judged  
Not a perfect piece

Standards of perfect  
Utilitarian life  
Not a polished piece

Bleach clouds on denim  
Windows float indigo sky  
Dreaming in cotton

Open the window  
Noah open the window  
Let the dove fly in

The little dove flew  
In the window and did mourn  
Open the window

The little dove brought  
Back the olive branch of peace  
Let the dove come in

Director went down  
Spoke to a couple experts  
Getting a good one

Intrinsic value  
Not a monetary way  
Leave that at the door

It's a good story  
Quilters and their connections  
Open the window

I am conflicted  
Family cherished its own  
History through cloth

I am conflicted  
Changing its life history  
Soul runs so deeply

Follow silver path  
The silver path to Jordan  
Follow follow on

Follow the river  
Don't look over your shoulder  
Brother, follow on

Lovelier than gold  
Lovelier than distant days  
Golden or silver

This lovely earth  
Lovelier still than heaven  
Where I need to stay

Follow silver path  
The silver path to Jordan  
Find the northern star

Mary L. Bennett  
Born down here in Brown Quarters  
County Road 29

Daughter of Lucille  
Ancestor of quiltmakers  
Delia's Granddaughter

Dad Finest Major  
Raised by Grandma Delia  
On Granddaddy's farm

working in the fields  
picking cotton, pulling corn  
and stripping millet

didn't get schooling  
every now and then a day  
here a day and there

Seeing my grandma  
Piecing it up, then I start  
I just take me some

nobody teach me  
I just learned it by myself  
Put it together

About twelve thirteen  
Piece them up the way they look  
Til they look just right

Together piece them  
Up till they look like I want  
Them to look. That's all

Quilters are griots  
Sewing into histories  
Patchwork memories

One might overlook  
An instrument of freedom  
Far beyond function

Hidden in plain view  
Something that can keep you warm  
Just might set you free

Sources of pleasure  
Communicative power  
Beauty and meaning

Hidden in plain sight  
Underground quilters sewing  
Fugitive symbols

If the lamp is lit  
You are free to shelter here  
If it is dark, run

Camouflaged symbols  
Secret encoded message  
Point us to freedom

To reach safe haven  
Designs not yet invented  
Passed from mouth to mouth

Who invented you?  
Jacob's Ladder quilt  
Those who escaped know

We are climbing high  
And higher we are climbing  
Higher and higher

Sinner do you love  
My Jesus? Sinner do you  
Love me Jesus, sinner?

We are climbing high  
And higher we are climbing  
Children of the Lord

Slaves were not brought here  
Stolen Africans trafficked  
Then they were enslaved

What cannot be said  
Passes needle to needle  
Stitching escape routes

Sometimes forms endure  
While meaning may not persist  
We must learn the codes

In quilted silence  
A covert social protest  
Stitches shout get free!

Creolizations  
Preserve and perpetuate  
Syntax of quilt tops

Birth, life, death, rebirth  
Watery ancestral realm  
Four moments of soul

Borders 'round countries  
There are borders 'round the sky  
Only borders close you in?  
Borders 'round your mind

Some have money, some have none  
What use is money  
If your heart's gone numb?

Open the window  
Big world's in a great big mess  
Open the window  
Find peace and rest

Open the window  
Open the window children  
Let the dove fly in

Cotton, linen, wool  
Gingham, muslin, poplin, twill  
The pull of the earth

Seersucker, canvas  
Madras, broadcloth, plaid  
The pull of the cloth

Grandma's hands clapped  
in church on Sunday morning  
My grandmother's hands

My grandmother's hands  
Played a tambourine so well  
My grandmother's hands

Grandma's hands used  
to issue out a warning  
She'd say, "Billy don't  
you run so fast, might  
fall on a piece of glass, might  
be snakes in that grass  
Grandma's hands

My grandmother's hands  
Used to ache sometimes and swell  
My grandmother's hands  
would lift her face and tell her  
Baby, Grandma understands  
That you really love that man  
Put yourself in Jesus' hands  
My grandmother's hands

Script is protection  
Choppy words discontinuous  
Thwart unhappy ghosts

Protective collage  
Quilts are metaphysical  
Insulate sleepers

Corporeal needs  
Physical warmth and safety  
Improvised upon

African elder  
Passing over other side  
A library burns

Grandma's hands used  
to hand me piece of candy  
Picked me up each time I fell  
they really came in handy  
Matty don' you whip that boy  
What you want to spank him for?  
He didn't drop no apple core

But I don't have Grandma anymore  
If I get to Heaven I'll look for  
Grandma's hands

Black liberation  
Reclaims sensuality  
Of ticking, flannel

Woman to woman  
Passing knowledge safekeeping  
Sounds of ancestors

There are *five square knots*  
*On the quilt every*  
*Two inches apart*

Escaping on the  
*Fifth knot on the tenth pattern*  
*On to Canada*

The monkey wrench turns  
Wagon wheel toward Canada  
On a bear's paw trail

Get to the crossroads  
There you dig a log cabin  
Shoofly must dress up

Dress up in cotton  
Go down to the cathedral  
Wear satin bow ties

Get married in church  
Exchange double wedding rings  
Flying geese will stay

Flying geese will stay  
On the drunkard's path follow  
Follow on bright stars

Oh Lord I won't let  
Oh Lord I won't let nothing  
Nothing turn me round

Oh Lord I won't let  
My Pa, Ma, Sister, Brother  
Nothing turn me round

Waiting to be found  
Imagery and poetics  
Beneath the language

The quilt pattern names  
An Underground Railroad Code  
Travel instructions

I started walking  
I started talking  
The Lord had gone set me free

Iconography  
The meaning of images  
Signs, symbols, stitches

Conceal yet reveal  
Patterns trigger memory  
A means of escape

The pattern of life  
The structure of history  
Teaching of morals

Geometric signs  
A society of secrets  
African theories

A trained eye could read  
A road, a pathway, a route  
Visual language

A know is not a knot  
Hide messages in plain view  
A knot is a king

Decades of silence  
Elders are braking with fear  
Now it can be told

Preserve heritage  
Listen to the stories sewn  
Mapping our journey

Deciphering code  
The fabric's fragile nature  
Threads to be followed

Stories are remnants  
Binding individuals  
To their ancestors

Arduous journeys  
Quilts were used as maps  
To free the enslaved

We juxtapose ideas  
In spirit of quilt making  
Piece together lives

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Nor Middle Passage<br>Could obliterate culture<br>Hidden everywhere             | Telling, listening<br>Comes responsibility<br>Honor ancestors  |
| The hand-me-down quilts<br>As everyday bedcovers<br>Are invisible               | Nonverbal alert<br>For those who were escaping<br>Pack up and move on  |
| Skillfully passed on<br>They become more visible<br>Encoding meaning            | Woke up this morning<br>With my mind set on freedom<br>Set on loving me  |
| Patterns are rhythms<br>Visual storytelling<br>The seamstresses drum            | Give me daily bread<br>Help me walk alone ahead<br>I walk through darkest valley<br>I will fear no love  |
| Improvisation<br>To be free in choice<br>Fabric and color                       | Oh my smile my mind<br>Reassure I need no one<br>Woke up this morning  |
| Find a broken star<br>Good spirits are heaven bound<br>A realm of bright light  | set on loving me<br>With my mind on loving me<br>set on loving me  |
| Tracing secret threads<br>Invokes ancestral blessings<br>From the talking drums | not lonely, alone<br>And I'm holy by my own<br>not lonely, alone   |
| Who chooses events<br>To document, remember<br>Dictates history?                | the bad days may come<br>lover may leave, winter not<br>the map of your palms<br>The temple you be<br>You are all that you got, Ye<br>the bad days may come<br>the map of your palms<br>The temple you be<br>You're all that you got |
| The call of a bird<br>Someone is waiting to help you<br>On the other side       |  |
| Our elders' stories<br>Heroism and cunning<br>Pass them on                      |  |
| Black sailors at port<br>Acted as post offices<br>Under the white gaze          | The map of your palms<br>I walk through darkest valleys<br>I will fear no love   |

My cup is full up  
Ye, nobody completes me  
don't mess with my stuff

what I got's enough  
and nobody completes me,  
don't mess with my love

Surely, surely, sure  
surely goodness and mercy  
Shall follow me  
Shall follow me  
Shall follow me

The flight of enslaved  
Zigzag lines throw off pursuit  
Regular device  
Shall follow me

If we come apart  
I will collect our pieces  
And stitch us new seams  
Surely, surely, surely

From many pieces  
A new world sewn together  
Just might keep us warm  
Follow me

Free range of the mind  
Maps the fire coasting sidelines  
Contact with an ease

Building a ladder  
Of love to you and I hope  
That love you build one

A ladder of love  
To you and I hope that love  
You will build one too

Hand in hand we fly  
Hand in hand we fly away  
Then we fly away

Oh, and (Ooh, ooh, ooh)

Everything we need  
To map out a plantation  
Hymns to the silence

Cleveland, Ohio  
Wagon Wheel on Bear's Paw trail  
Underground railroad

The Bear Paw's quilt  
Migrated across the states  
Leading people home

Didn't you tremble?  
Don't you want to cross over?  
Lord, I want to cross

Take me river's way  
Lord, I want to cross over  
Into campground, Lord!

Let me cross over  
Take me to the river. Lord  
I want to go

Casting its shadows  
The sun moving east and west  
Turns trees to compass

Blue calico creeks  
Twenty miles to the safe house  
White strips for roads

Perilous journey  
Enslaved leave in the springtime  
Constant rain for days

Stitching freedom quilts  
Each day touching the pattern  
Memorize the route



Follow the Bear's Paw path  
Where the water routes meet land routes  
Then keep going north

Get to the crossroad  
Cleveland, Ohio  
Eshu is waiting

Every day object  
The quilt triggers memory  
Mnemonic device

Domestic outlaw  
Trained to read the symbols  
Encoded secrets

Reach the main station  
City sitting at crossroads  
May freedom paths

Come to the meeting  
Let us break bread together  
Singing freedom's nigh

My Lord he calls me  
He call me by the thunder  
Ain't got long to stay

Pharoah, oh Pharoah  
What a beautiful morning  
Let me people go

Oh, go down Moses  
Smite so hard he could not stand  
Let my people go

Follow drinking gourd  
No one knows the wise man says  
Follow the drinking gourd

The red center is the heart  
The yellow center safe house  
We wear indigo

Log cabin, Nine Patch  
Streak of lightning, Double Star  
Little Boy's Britches

Barn Raising, Straight Rows  
Drunkard's Path, Railroad Crossing  
Tree of Paradise

Cotton Leaf, Nine Block  
Birds Over the Elements  
Travel in zigzag

Yellow center quilt  
Beacon in the wilderness  
Signals a safe house

With secrets to keep  
Dig a symbol on the ground  
To show Brotherhood

Glory be to God  
Glory be to God in the high  
For these souls now safe

See listen pass on  
The stories of our elders  
Wait for us to claim

Deep in heart mind soul  
The journey requires a change  
From enslaved to free

Honor and respect  
You get the code when you need  
When you are ready

Dear Mary Bennett  
Building a ladder to you  
Hand in hand in hand

Thank you for your quilt  
Connecting me to my past  
Present and future

Black artists create  
Liberatory practice  
Black reconstruction

Across time and space  
Our creative agency  
Takes up the question

Challenge the spatial  
We reject the boundaries  
Liberate our joy

Black futurity  
Designing another world  
With us and for us

Hand in hand we fly  
Hand in hand we fly away  
Then we flew away.

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