

Nicole Sadek

The Holy City

In Charleston, seafood is our gold. We speak from salted tongues and carry clouds of humidity on our shoulders—let our sand-washed hair and southern accents flow like Spartina grass on a summer’s marsh. We are a medley of Daniel Island, Mount Pleasant, West Ashley, and Isle of Palms, linked by the Emmanuel 9 and Highway 17. We are artists, musicians, the so-called liberals of the state, yet we still call our farms plantations and our tourist attractions slave markets.

We are cigarette butts tightly packed between cobblestone.

We are the clogging of horse hooves. We are the thirteen steps that lead to Drayton Hall, and we are the superstitious. Limestone and granite are our only markers, those chapped walls of a Georgian Meeting Street apartment; brick, one-room quarters, dressed in moss and spider webs, bowing down to Master’s House; three-storied Italianates at the harbor’s edge; suburban homes at every bend of the Holy City.

Our skyline is the sharp incline and descent of church steeples and the diamond-shaped towers of the Ravenel Bridge. Wooden crosses adorn the horizon, casting shadows like fishing wire against downtown streets.

In the farther corners of the county, after Patriot’s Point and Waterfront Park, my home kneels in solidarity with the Mother Emmanuel A.M.E. Church, where nine were shot dead in prayer.

My own mother likes to tell me, as we drive over railroad tracks and dead opossums, “Don’t ever take this for granted.” She speaks in broken English, an Arabic melody loose between her lips. Then she looks up at factory-made clouds and repeats, “Not ever.”

In Charleston, seafood is her gold. She speaks from a sandy tongue and carries the weight of the past on her shoulders—lets her wispy hair and Egyptian accent drift in the country she now calls home. She knows the entire history of this city, as if she lived through the days of cannons and battleships. So she takes

me to the U.S.S. Yorktown, the ship mast that pokes through the skyline, to Rainbow Row, pastel-painted homes along old roads, to the marshes that decorate the county, to the ocean, to the Hunley submarine, to the Spoleto Festival, to Magnolia Gardens, to watch baseball games, to watch students kayak the floods of downtown streets—to school, in one of the most dangerous town's in the country.

Sea salt does not run through wind here, nor does it hide behind fingernails. Instead, the air is smoke and the language is anything but sweet grass. Here, people remember the name Walter Scott on a spring morning. They remember eight shots, five strikes, and a video camera.

We are the wooden shacks against the highway, the small structures made of ten russet planks, set up at an intersection. We are selling our art, but our skin is golden brown, and this city was not built for us.

My hometown is a place cradled between two languages. For my mother, it is the quiet, lush, and green. For me, it is where waves bend and crash and floods are far too common, where people light candles atop the stairs of a large white church, where deer and geese and alligators live freely among the children.

...a place so rich with history that Confederate descendants choke on the smog of their ancestors, where every drum beat from the Citadel's procession is the echo of a Carolina's insecurities, a residual of white robes and Jim Crow.

Charleston is speckled with birds and gunshots.

Our seafood is gold, and color is everything.