

Caroline Bybee
"Who We Were"

At first, we were hot car kids. It meant that our parents left us in the car when they brought us to the store, the windows rolled up and the engine off. They would buy cigarettes and lotto tickets - death and false hope - while we drowned in our own sweat against the sticky vinyl seats. Passersby would click their tongues, but what could they do? We were someone else's kids, someone else's problems. Our parents had forgotten or didn't care about us out there in the car because they would lean on the counters and list out their problems to any bum cashier who would listen while we waited, patient because we didn't have any other options.

After that, when we grew up, we were fire escape kids. We climbed like monkeys or spiders over the rusted metal frames, watched the stars and the city and each other from high above the dirty streets where all our dreams died. We had had so many dreams when we sat in those hot cars and now we had nothing, not a handful of quarters to show for our hopes and so we stole what we wanted instead - trivial things like bubble gum and warm bottles of Pepsi that we shared under the stars on those broken metal skeletons. On the fire escapes we pretended that we were invincible, even when we cut our hands and ripped our jeans and broke our hearts looking out at the lights of a world that we could never be part of.

And then we were guns and rap and short skirts kids. The brothers loved their guns, the cold flashing contraband that they tucked into their waist bands, that they thought made them cool, and they loved their rap, harsh meaningless sentences that they protested to the empty alley ways, banging on the tops of the garbage cans to make a beat. The sisters watched them rapping; sometimes we tapped out the beats but they yelled because we were never quick enough, so we tied up our shirts and we wore short skirts, trying to impress someone even though we never did know who. That was just the way it was and we'd never known anything but bare legs swinging off the broken fire escapes and tan lines on our bare stomachs.

We were always our own race, not black or white, but forgotten. When we sat in hot cars and on the fire escapes and banged our ways through the alleys with short skirts

and guns, we knew that we were not like the other kids, the ones who were never left in the cars, the ones who'd never stolen a stick of gum or a bottle of Pepsi, the ones who didn't know how to rap, who didn't know the feel of a gun in your palm. We were the kids who got shuffled from place to place when our parents finally decided that they loved the cigarettes and the lotto tickets more than us - something that we'd known all along - and we moved from house to house before any could become a home, sleeping on overstuffed couches, under thin blankets, in crowded bedrooms, on narrow beds where we knew that we were never really wanted. It was who we were and we knew it, better than every well intentioned soul who ever tried to take us under their wing, better than our parents who held out hoping until the very last second when they gave us up, better than anyone who'd ever seen us and cursed us for being a blight on the city.

It was just who we were.