Grandfather

By Michael S. Harper

In 1915 my grandfather’s neighbors surrounded his house near the dayline he ran on the Hudson in Catskill, NY and thought they’d burn his family out in a movie they’d just seen and be rid of his kind: the death of a lone black family is the Birth of a Nation, or so they thought.

His 5’4” waiter gait quenched the white jacket smile he’d brought back from watered polish of my father on the turning seats, and he asked his neighbors up on his thatched porch for the first blossom of fire that would bring him down. They went away, his nation, spittooning their torched necks in the shadows of the riverboat they’d seen, posse decomposing; and I see him on Sutter with white bag from your restaurant, challenged by his first grandson to a foot-race he will win in white clothes.

I see him as he buys galoshes for his railed yard near Mineo’s metal shop, where roses jump as the el circles his house toward Brooklyn, where his rain fell; and I see cigar smoke in his eyes, chocolate Madison Square Garden chews he breaks on his set teeth, stitched up after cancer, the great white nation immovable as his weight wilts and he is on a porch that won’t hold my arms, or the legs of the race run forwards, or the film played backwards on his grandson’s eyes.