

**Crossing to Sanctuary:
Alexandria's Contrabands and Freedmen's Cemetery**

—Written for the 10th anniversary celebration of the Contrabands and Freedmen's Cemetery Memorial, September 7, 2024

On this hallowed ground
grieving families and friends
marked resting places for their beloveds
with wooden grave markers.
They adorned the graves with oyster shells
that spoke of the sea and eternal life.

So many coffins held children.
They lay in wooden boxes,
elongated hexagons that reminded
where the small heads and shoulders reposed,
the funerary crate tapering
at legs and feet.

The earth mother around them
continues to offer hidden and untold stories
about simple buttons and nails
and Civil War bullets,
to reveal shards of everyday life,
even old stone tools.

We stand on this earth knowing that although
our ancestors' remains now lie undisturbed,
their lives suffered a dark history.
It was a time when shackling Black bodies
was the law of the land, when
segregation and racial discrimination,
poll taxes and literacy tests,
Jim Crow and white supremacy
were everywhere,
the air everyone breathed.

But despite the hundreds of years
that enslaved flesh and bones and minds,

these ancestors, willful and bold,
could finally cross to sanctuary.
Exhausted and weak and thin
they crossed to sanctuary
even if many took their last breaths
after the passage to freedom.

We ask for their forgiveness—
for the villainy of generations past,
for those who desecrated their graves,
for the unfathomable sorrow of their descendants,
for the continuing injustices,
for all who suffer
because the powerful persist in pushing them
to the powerless margins.

We now come to them
in reverence and awe.

Rest in peace, our ancestors.
Rest knowing that you were
an early light
navigating a path of thorns to roses
through this archway in today's Alexandria.
Our city mourns and grieves,
remembers, re-consecrates,
and lifts up your lives.
Rest in peace, our ancestors.
Rest in power.
Rest in justice.
Rest in dignity.
Rest in truth.
Rest in freedom.

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