

41 Steps for Amadou Diallo

a pas de deux

1. February 4, 1999, 23-year old Guinean son Amadou Diallo is shot to death in a hail of bullets. He is reaching for his wallet to show his papers as a police officer stumbles backwards. He dies at 1157 Wheeler Avenue in the Bronx.

3. February 12, 1999, I wake suddenly. My body is jarred before my soul can return to it properly. I am not myself.

5. In Tallahassee, it is my habit to walk 3 or 4 miles each morning. It is 100 yards from our house in the woods to the main thoroughfare, Rte. 319. Sometimes I sprint those yards. Sometimes I walk as slowly as I can to feel my feet against the concrete, to feel the bones beneath my feet. It is the South. They are there to be felt.

8. 319 begins just outside Apalachicola, Florida at the John Gorrie Memorial Bridge.

9. Dr. John Gorrie, born in Nevis, passes for white. Books pretend he is born in South Carolina. Books pretend his mother is Spanish. He is a physician hero. There are statues to him. If he wasn't white when he was born, he is white now.

10. Apalachicola gulf water home to the Apalachee. Removed to make way. Swept out. Swept away. It is said they were put somewhere north and west. The gulf told me their bodies were put into the sea. Swept away.

12. 319 ends in Wadley, Georgia. 1500 black folks. Some still sharecropping. Some still remembering. I drove through Wadley on my way north. Everyone was over 70 or under 6. The old people waved. Someone called out,

2. I have a son in New York. He is a musician and plays late into the night. I see him reaching for his wallet to prove he is more than his black body. I see myself falling backwards with the news that his beautiful body has been opened by 41 bullets. I can see his wife and children falling backwards from the hail of news.

4. I can hear his mother wailing.

6. My own blood child turns 23 in 1999.

7. I had a recurring dream about my brother. He is crossing a minefield. He is running like he is back in high school; a running back scoring touchdowns. He does not know the danger. Later, my dream hero brother has moved to Iowa. He is crossing a cornfield. His steps are stealthy. He moves his body so as not to disturb the stalks of corn. He carries his medical bag with him. He wants to be a hero. The corn is whispering to him. "Careful." "Careful." "Careful."

11. In Miami, a man on the street grabbed my arm as I was passing by. He was beautiful underneath his condition. He pulled me close to him, and whispered, "Hide me. Hide me. They are making way for the king. I am an enemy of the state." "I can't," I whisper back. "There's no hiding place down here." He released me and ran.

13. I wasn't playing with his paranoia. The Pope was coming. The streets and underpasses were being swept clean. He turned back to me, and shouted "Run!"

"Girl, you lost?"

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“No, I ain’t lost. I’m Mollye’s girl.”

14. My head hurts from not finding my body in time. I stumble to the sink and splash water on my face. I hold my face after the third splashing, breathe out, and look up slowly to recognize myself.

16. Soon I am outside, running to the highway. When I get there, I stop and begin counting my steps. My steps are slow and deliberate. 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-11-12-13-14-15-16-17-18-19-20-21-22-23-24-25-26-27-28-29-30-31-32-33-34-35-36-37-38-39-40-41. On the forty-first step, I prostrate myself and say, “May God Bless the Soul of Amadou Diallo.”

18. And then another 41-steps, and a prayer for his well-being. Again, and again, on the sidewalk that runs along the 6-lane highway.

19. I am not a woman who puts her face where other people have walked. On this day, I did.

20. I was not aware of being a spectacle. I don’t doubt people were watching me and wondering. I hadn’t planned it. I was possessed by it.

21. I had my wallet with me, my keys just as Guinean son Amadou did. Whether my driver’s license would have provided sufficient evidence, I don’t know. I didn’t think about these things until later.

23. I walked for 11 miles. Down 319 to Miccosukee Road. Then I took the back way home, winding through residential neighborhoods. I humbled my steps, and called out Amadou’s name as if I were his mother.

15. One day, I climbed the hill from the railroad station, across the tracks up to the Black Archives building on FAMUs campus. Fraternities were steppin on The Set. Each brother carried a staff. The sound of their stagger steps were punctuated by the crack of the staves against the concrete, and the exhalation of the men’s call and response. There was loveliness in the music of their bodies.

17. We lived in Philadelphia at the time of MOVE, Part One, before the bomb was dropped, during the reign of Frank Rizzo. It was not unusual to see black men on North Avenue being beat down for their paychecks on Friday evenings by policemen. I remember the crack of the nightsticks against their staggering bodies, the sound of air knocked from them, the sound of coins falling from their pockets to the concrete. It must have been like music. There was delight in the upswing, and the snap of the wrist down. I saw a woman put down her groceries and run to cover the body of a young man. We thought it was her son. He said, “I don’t know you. Don’t do it.”

22. I was driving down the street. A boy calls to his mother from his bike. She stops, smiles, and waves. The boy is nearly hit by a car. I see his mother in my side view mirror as her knees buckle, and she crumples to the ground. I stop and think to go back to her.

24. “I’m okay,” he calls as he drops his bicycle and runs to his mother’s side,

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25. I don't know how many times I called his name. I lost count after 41.

"I'm okay, Ma."

27. When I got back home it was hours later. "Where did you go," my husband asked worried. I couldn't tell him. I could only nod that I was well. He grabbed my shoulder and said urgently, "Tell me when I get home." I expected him to say, "Run!"

26. In Tallahassee, I heard no word of Amadou's funeral. I think perhaps Madame Kadiatou has taken him home. O, Maa.

28. Amadou's pine coffin rocks on a sea of hands. He sails down the streets of Harlem.

hide me hide me

careful careful careful

29. In the evening, I try to explain. To his many questions, I can only shrug and shake my head. "I don't know." "I can't remember."

He says, "His funeral was today."

i am an enemy of the state

30. From Newark to Paris to Conakry he flies.

31. I sleep heavily for some hours. I am not finished yet. In the dark I rise and move to the living room where I rock and rock and pray until I stop, and return to bed.

32. Then the 300 mile journey to Hollade Bouru and home to earth that holds the bodily remains of his grandfathers. Make way for a king.

33. May God Bless the Soul of Justin Fields.

i went to the rock to hide my face, the rock cried out, "No Hiding Place," there s no hiding place down here.

35. May God Bless the Soul of Devin Brown...

34. ...of Malcolm Ferguson

37. May God Bless the Soul of Clifford Glover...

36. ...of Archie Eliot

39. May God Bless the Soul of Prince Jones....

38. ...of Jose Campos Torres

40.of Ousmane Zongo

41. ...their mothers, their fathers, their children.

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May God Bless the Soul of Amadou Diallo.
Aaaaaaaaaaaamen.