

*It Echoes In My Bones: Black Women's*  
Resistance to The Stethoscope

by Ava Marshall

*For Lucy, Betsey,*

*Anarcha, Sarah, Joice, and so many more*

## FOREWORD

This is an exploration of the echoes. The shivers down my spine when I would enter the doctor's office so deep the cold couldn't have caused it. The soul of my father's desire to avoid the doctor's office. "Drink Orange Juice," he would say. How the white of the doctor's coat would strike my cornea at a shocking intensity. How the prick of the needle would produce a paralyzing pain. These weren't accidents. It wasn't just some mistakes at the hands of my nervous system. There was something about these feelings that were beyond my bodily systems. These feelings were deeply entrenched in my being as if they radiated from the melanin in my skin to the glisten of my dark brown eyes. These feelings were not feelings. They were the echoes of people. Of the enslaved black women whose echoes lived within my bones. I didn't understand them, why they chose me to disable with their whispers. I didn't understand that they were warning me. They were reminding me of myself. Of the white gaze. Of my black womanhood. Of the history they were trapped in. Most essentially, they were telling me I wasn't alone.

This is the exploration of the echoes. It's plural for a reason. They chilled the bones of my mother. Of my cousins. My sister. It was a generational chill that made trips to the doctor's office more than just a check-in. And it was there for a reason, it was there to make us remember. I know those echoes are there, that they are speaking, but I don't know what they are saying. One of the casualties of a history maintained using white-out. This is my attempt to make words from the whispers. I have put the experiences of the black women in my life in conversation with the black women who came before them. The enslaved black women's bodies who were exploited, violated, and dismissed for the sake of American medicine. This is in no way their words. It is in no way their opinions or feelings. Those were taken from them. This is an attempt at my personal healing. It is a naming of the echoes that have been neglected. I don't know what this will do, but I hope it will be *something*. Something that provides restoration for us despite the numerous nothings by the institutions that have wronged us. Here I name the women who have been nameless and defame the white men and their masses that silenced them. So they will not have names, but these black women, my ancestors, they will be named and listened to. This is Black Women's Resistance to The Stethoscope.

Part I: *“Attempt to break it down”*

## From my cousin, Brittany

*I*ve never really had a fear of the doctor's office. Growing up I was VERY prone to sickness whether it be pink eye, strep throat, flu, or any of the other million reasons I've ever needed a doctor so I grew pretty accustomed to going. I basically knew what to expect every time I went and could almost guess the treatment they were going to give me. I noticed often that a lot of the medications given to me were prescribed for a group of illnesses and most were to basically wipe all bacteria from the body, including good bacteria. So it became a cycle. I'd take meds, feel better, but the good bacteria was gone so I'd end up right back sick again. That caused me to rebel against the doctors.

Statistics show that doctor's prescriptions are at an all-time high and I truly believe that this is what is keeping America so sick. Our bodies have become immune to treatment because they give the same prescriptions with the same high dose no matter what you're being seen for and this is causing resistance with a lot of medications. These days I don't really visit the doctor except for annuals or checkups for that reason and often find myself using the holistic approach anytime I feel ill. I can happily say I have ended my own personal vicious cycle of always being sick and I encourage more people to research just how powerful holistic medicine can be.

The way I feel about traditional medicine is so much deeper than this little bit that I'm saying but we'd be here all day if I was to attempt to break it down. My opinion is based on years of my own research into how crooked big pharma really is while also trying to heal myself internally."

*Brittany,*

**Attempt to break it down,**

cause them doctors don't care bout your pain

hell, i know pain

don't trust that medicine

they just *Hell* objectified,

disguised

yeah they crooked but disguised

lights and dollars fill the white in their eyes

them white hands love warm black flesh

that fluster that reddens the skin,

them red cheeks were tightened by my screams

but their ears were stuffed with the stethoscope

but i know they ain't soundproof

how does a sadist not listen to its victim?

like a doctor doesn't listen to his patient

i know he was listening

bladders, birth, babies

he knew something was missing

I guess a sponge was missing

its holes call for my blood

now mummies using sponges to clean it up

its holes filled with my blood

**Break it down for them**

don't let them get away with it

i ain't healed

But i hope you can

My Name signed in my blood

But it ain't stop rushing,

*Lucy*

Part II: *“They tried to cover it up”*



## From my cousin, Jontae

*I have intentionally researched selected female doctors who other women I trust have chosen as their providers. This was partially due to concerns with male doctors lacking familiarity with my experiences and health concerns as a woman, as well as a lack of trust for white male providers specifically. I have not had a negative personal experience with white male doctors. However, I have never trusted any of my white male colleagues due to their divergent philosophies, ignorance of minority issues and my perception of them feel that I (or others) have benefited from tokenism. So for my health, I made a conscious decision NOT to select one, as I do not trust them to have my best interests in mind (or understand my experience).*

*A close friend of mine experienced a significant issue with a white male provider amputating her mother's leg due to an error made during surgery.*

*They tried to cover it up and one of the female nurses was so disturbed by what happened that she gave all of the information and notes to my friend and she was in tears (not fearing the loss of her employment, but the disparity in treatment and their attempt to act like it was necessary once they started the surgery).*

*I have white female PCPs and OBGYNs. I initially desired black females but there was a lack of them in the area of town that I needed and one black OBGYN is exceptional but she consistently runs past her time (because she is very thorough) but that is not workable for me - I can't wait on average 2-3 hours for an appointment due to other obligations."*

*Jontae,*

Yeah

**they tried to cover it up**

except they succeeded

but how is it a success when that *Pain* between my legs still got that familiar twang

*you don't know pain till*

metal becomes like opposing magnets

parting my legs like their land to be conquered

But its a success

they conquered my intimate parts

they made them into working parts

for the machinery they won awards for

it manufactured *Pain* to progress

turned black faces to empty spaces

*you don't know silence till*

you ain't even got your name

they weren't empty spaces

i got that wrong

they got white faces to take our places

but they prevented their pain like they prevented our *Truth*

their stethoscope wipes their memory

*or that's what they say*

they tried to keep it that way

except they succeeded

my body was bare

exposed to their gazes

ain't no privacy when your body's been privatized

ain't no freedom when your own body causes your imprisonment

but don't let them cover it up

they ain't cover up my body from those many eyes watching

don't let them hide,

*Betsey*

Part Three: “*she was the expert, and I was there to just listen*”

## From my sister, Zoe

*I never really liked my pediatrician growing up because I felt as though she never really listened to me or treated me like an actual person, even as I got older. The relationship, in my opinion, was always extremely hierarchical, where she was the expert, and I was there to just listen, which in my opinion is counterintuitive to effective care. It wasn't until I got to college and went to the clinic on campus that I felt like a doctor had actually listened to me, and caught things my pediatrician had not mentioned over years of seeing her.*

*One egregious incident that stands out to me from my pediatrician was when I was around 12 or 13 and I had a higher BMI than the "normal" one. My doctor, after I said I worked out every day, said that I "wasn't getting any taller" and thus had to get my weight down to decrease my BMI. Despite me being at prime eating disorder age, and actually fitting a number of other risk factors for bulimia nervosa, she told me I needed to go on a strict diet.*

*Fortunately, I didn't develop an ED, but her willingness to suggest something like that without even considering how a vulnerable young girl might react to being told to lose weight at all costs is disturbing, and it makes me sad and angry to think about. Especially considering that she put all the emphasis on me as a child and failed to do her job since I didn't receive this super important diagnosis of PCOS until I was 19 years old, and she had been retired for years.*

*Not to mention that she had also taken quite a bit of money from pharmaceutical companies and other corporations while she was treating patients. It's something that sticks with me, especially as I've taken more classes about the politics and the fraught history of medicine.*

Zoe,

**she was the expert, and I was there to just listen**

I'm familiar with that bullshit, baby  
they always in the right  
like they don't live in the wrong  
like they ain't been singing the same damn song  
hymns that belittle our minds like theirs works better

*he was the expert  
and i was mindless  
he was the expert  
and i was spineless  
he was the expert  
and i was the puppet*

***at least that's what they say***

age is a game  
and i was the loser  
that's how they painted it  
i had a voice but they just tainted it  
My body was their exhibit  
My wrinkles hid dollar bills in its crevices

*he was the expert  
and i was mindless  
he was the expert  
and i was spineless  
he was the expert  
and i was the puppet*

***at least that's what they say***

watch out for them white hands after your death, baby  
that quiet heart don't equate to rest  
they put it on ice  
try to cook it like rice  
tryna' make something out of it  
My body, in its sleep  
displayed like dead, black bodies  
'cause ain't no comparison like the truth  
to do it justice

*they are the expert  
and we are mindless  
they were the expert  
and we were spineless  
they were the expert  
and we were the puppet*

***At least that's what they say  
And their word is the law  
So watch out.***

*Joice*

## Part Four: “*I felt vulnerable*”

## From My mother, Donna

*“My experiences with the medical community has been positive for the most part over the years.*

*Mind you, as a child of the 1960's, doctors appointments were a luxury for my family, so I don't remember very many doctor's appointments although I did visit the doctor for vaccinations, for unexpected issues like when I developed hives and when I was very sick, like when I had the chickenpox maybe the measles.*

*My doctors have treated me with dignity and respect. I will say I think my position as a public figure played a role. I was a television news anchor and reporter for nearly two decades and I suspect that may have differentiated me from other patients, although I can't say that for sure. However I rarely if ever had a problem.*

*When my first child was born, I found my doctor very attentive and both the pregnancy and the birth went accordingly as planned and went well. But when my second baby was born, I had an infection and had a scheduled C section, but my doctor was unavailable at the worst time and this was very uncomfortable. I can't remember why she wasn't available, but I felt vulnerable. Everything went well, however I developed an infection afterwards that took my doctor several weeks to diagnose. This was perhaps my worst medical experience the birth of my second daughter, miracle that it still was.*

*I have nothing in my medical experience to compare to the anxiety of what's happening in America today where the cost of medical care and medical insurance is so unaffordable, my husband and I are uninsured. The worst kind of medical care - is no medical care at the time in our lives when it's possibly most needed -- as we age. My story, our story is the case for millions of Americans. This egregious situation also really risks an already tenuous medical predicament for many African Americans getting even more tenuous - as studies show how the medical community treats black and white patients so differently.*

*These are life and death issues. As a black older woman today, I know the power elite in this country DOES NOT have my medical needs on their agenda as African American women, people - marginalized centuries ago - are still pushed to the margins again.*

*This is one of the medical community's most pressing issues.”*



*Donna,*

**I felt vulnerable, too**

30 is the number  
My baby, why do you hurt me?  
fistula makes my body throb like flames  
or is it these white hands  
was it My baby that really hurt me?

30 aint just a number  
ain't no gain to my pain  
white gloves don't protect me  
white hands on my body  
flesh on flesh like we're lovers  
**but intimacy don't hurt like this**  
Why do they get to see my body without its  
shell?

30 feels like burning  
My baby, i know you ain't hurt me  
Doctors doctor truth like its their patient  
Except im the patient but they aren't patient  
My legs feel like fire  
ain't no taming these flames  
'cause Doc got a light in his hand

*my age don't count for nothing  
but i've been counting  
i was burning  
30 is explosive  
and my body can't take it  
so I feel vulnerable,*

*Anarcha*

Part Five: *“I don’t know if it ever ends.”*

From me,

“*I* have always been afraid of doctors. All of the many forms they take.

My nightmares consisted of being rushed to the hospital, pulling at the constraints that force me into submission. Whenever I would enter a hospital outside of my dreams, my heart couldn't stop beating. I can remember that upon learning I needed a shot, the nurses ushering me towards this fate were met with screams and tears for my father. As the door shut, the anxiety of being alone with such a sharp torture device absolutely petrified me. And those feelings never left me. Hospitals, doctor's offices, ambulance trucks, they were all petrifying.

After getting in a minor car accident on the way to church one morning, the broken window on my side left me with an assortment of cuts and lacerations. The ambulance who came applied bandages. I insisted, with tears in my eyes, that they not take me to the hospital. As I sat on the truck, the movement of the truck shot a jolt of concern down my spine. Their smiles didn't convince me. I felt vulnerable. I needed help. But I didn't want it.

This vulnerability continued to dwell in me. It continues to. And I don't know if it ever ends.

Ava,

**I don't know if it ever ends**

My body was a painting  
but it wasn't granted any plaque that told the world about me  
**it** wasn't about me  
My body was the cure for their perversion  
'cause a Black woman ain't no victim  
in a white world

prayers took me out of My body  
made me feel like its My body  
'cause it is My body  
not no whites man's party  
I guess i ain't got no **will** to work against  
my brown eyes can't be read  
or *won't* be  
how can an object consent?

i ain't no victim  
but don't praise me for my endurance  
My skin wasn't **never** fond of the white eyes  
laughter disguising their attraction  
don't trust them smiles  
they nothing but liars  
'cause a white man ain't your friend  
in a white world

My body was a pilgrimage  
just land to exploit  
so why should you think yours is any different  
why should you think it's your's  
their hands ain't tryna' shake yours  
they want to measure your rear **end**  
they ain't your friend  
don't let them in,

*Sarah*

## EPILOGUE

It will never end. That is a truth this project is made to understand. Histories have shadows. And those shadows hang out like old friends. They are whispering the warnings I wish I had. I'm putting these whispers into a megaphone. They are imagined whispers, in conversation with the histories given surrounding these black women who have been betrayed and forgotten by the medical institution who exploited them. Progress is violence. It erases Lucy. It erases Betsey. It erases Sarah. It erases Joice. It erases Anarcha. It erases these conversations, this dialogue between generations. This was an attempt to mend those holes. But I've realized they cannot be mended. That they live on within our scars, which transfer like genotypes. I'm not sure what this will do. But I hope it will amplify the echoes in our bones. So our fears are spoken to and not silenced. I'm afraid, but at least I know I'm not alone. And maybe we can find solidarity in our trepidations.

Maybe this is resistance. Maybe this is restorative. Maybe this is pointless. Maybe it is poignant. Maybe it is nothing. Maybe it is everything. Maybe, Maybe, Maybe.

***At least it's something.***

Be careful,  
That stethoscope got a mind of its own.

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