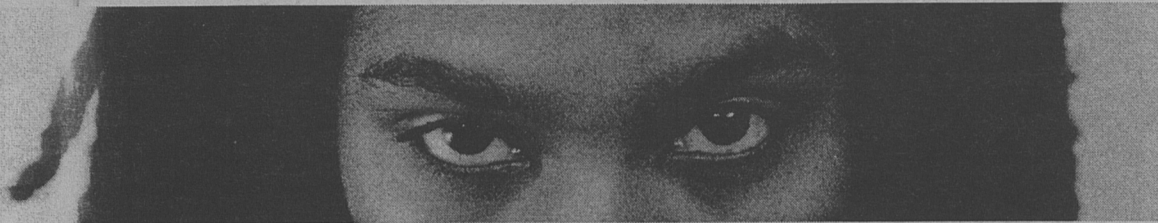


## Letta Neely, continued from page 21



**OITM:** One of the first things I noticed about *Juba* was the publisher, Wildheart Press. What is Wildheart Press?

**LN:** It's a new independent press that I started. I was sending my work to various presses, and they either had a backlog, or they wanted to publish it, or didn't, but regardless, there's not a lot of money... It was time for the book to be done. And I felt like, "OK, well, I can do this. It's OK. Mark Twain did it, Ani DiFranco does it."

You know, people of color have all sorts of independent theater companies, and chapbooks — I made two chapbooks, one by myself and one with the help of another publisher — and I just felt like, "I can do it, and it's necessary."

**OITM:** What is juba?

**LN:** Juba began for me when I was in third grade. We used to watch this African

**Queer adults don't necessarily know a lot of queer youth. We get so scared that we'll be blamed for causing somebody else to be gay...**

American folklore show on television, and the refrain before the show started was "Juba this, juba that, juba kill the yellow cat, we break the bread, they give us the crust..." I can't remember the whole thing. I told my dad it was my

favorite song in the world. He asked me what it meant, and I said, "It means that the black people made magic to poison the white people during slavery." And I was so excited about this resistance we'd had. My father and my mother are very into black knowledge, but he never corrected me...

I grew up later to learn that it was about the food. It was saying that, "you know, we make all these things, and you give us the mess food." It makes the slaves stronger, but if the masters had to eat it, they would die.

**OITM:** So juba is the food that the slaves would eat?

**LN:** Juba is the leftover crap food. And some of it was much more nutritious than was expected. But Juba is also river, and a hand clap that was passed down from Africa that survived. It's also a dance. It's also a type of music that African people brought with them. It has become all these things to me — it's just this mystical word. It maintained my personal resistance to bullshit for years.

**OITM:** You have a number of poems about children, or poems that feature young people. The longest and one of the most powerful of the poems in *Juba* is "Rhonda, Age 15 Emergency Room."

**LN:** So often poets, activists, we don't listen to people who are younger than us, we don't recognize what they have to go through, or that they exist, and ["Rhonda"] was the sort of poem that could do that. You know, I've been that young, and I've been through trauma myself. Queer adults don't necessarily know a lot of queer youth. We forget. We get so scared in our own homophobia that we'll be blamed for causing somebody else to be gay, that we don't talk to queer youth, and that's dangerous...

I've been out since I was about 9 years old. I came home and said, "Mom this is my girlfriend." She said "Think about it." And I thought about it until I was 16, and I said, "This is my girlfriend," and then I thought about it again until the first coming out day of college, and I came home and I wrote a letter. After that I didn't go home a lot...

This last time it's been kind of amazing because my dad, contrary to any belief I could have ever held, has sold my book to every person in the neighborhood. I found out the man had sold my book, you know, and everybody was saying, "I read your book, I read your book," and I thought, "Oh my god, they know I'm a

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## FEATURED KEYNOTES



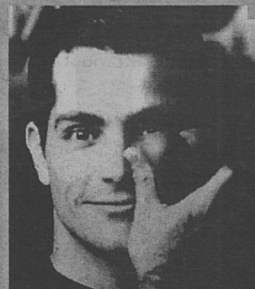
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POET



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