

Hey Paw

Hey Paw. At Least I can guess that's what they'd call you.

I never thought there would be a moment where you and I could somehow be in the same room. But here we are.

They often times say, we're one Mississippi. We stand under the same flag. We stand on the same soil. We fight the same weather. But our struggles are so very different.

The idea that your voice was hung from a hollow tree for voicing your opinion while spaces away I would be highlighted for voicing mine, is as Mississippi as it gets.

And sometimes I hate us for it.

Walking through the museum puts you in a space so sacred that it's almost hard to breathe: All the eyes of history are on you and there's this intense pressure to somehow not fail those who have fallen for you.

I recently read a transcript between my fourth great grandfather and Mississippi's Choctaw registry. They asked was his father a Choctaw. He said yes. They asked was his mother a Choctaw. He said no. She was a slave. They asked what was his mother's name. He only knew one part. He guessed the rest. They asked if his parents were still alive. He said yes because that's last he'd heard since the South surrendered at the end of the war. It had been 30 years later. They asked was his wife Choctaw. He said no, negro. They asked had he'd been a slave. He said yes. They asked when was he born. He said he didn't know: He guessed.

So much of my ancestry is left in question: It's in the air. It's in a big black space.

And the museum reminded me of that, though it's intentions were entirely pure.

Though history is so well documented, mine will forever not be. And that's a feeling of identity that will never be recovered.

My Paw is J. E. Gates. His name is in the National Lynching Museum in Montgomery, Alabama. His name will soon be added to the long list of lynched souls in our civil rights museum. Just feet away from his descendant's voice who says she's fighting for the freedom of those who will follow her.

Mississippi Goddamn.

And sometimes I hate us for it.