Adele V. Holden

Painted the Eastern Shore Town Where She Grew Up With These Words in the poem “Patchworks of our lives.” The poem, in its entirety, opened her memoir, Down on the Shore: The Family and Place That Forged a Poet’s Voice, which I published in 2000.

Adele Holden may be one of the most phenomenal women you’ve never heard of. A career-long English teacher at Dunbar High School and the Community College of Baltimore City, she would have cringed at a sentence that ended with a preposition. She studied poetry with Elliot Coleman during the earlier days of the Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars (on full scholarship, no less). She published Figurine and Other Poems, her only other book, in 1961. She often lunched with Josephine Jacobsen, counted Ruby Dee among her friends, and sustained correspondence with Langston Hughes. Nikki Giovanni called Down on the Shore “a moving testament to the human spirit.”

Adele taught hundreds of students, many of whom went on to great things, such as Robert M. Bell, the first African-American man to serve as the Maryland Court of Appeals’ chief judge. The Enoch Pratt Free Library decorated one of its prime Cathedral Street display windows in her honor when Figurine published. In 1963, she was inducted into the Iota Phi Lambda sorority’s society of “Living Makers of Negro History.” Nearly 40 years passed between the two stories that appeared in The Sun about her and her books.

She never married or had children, but imparted words of wisdom to many nieces and nephews and their kids (and at least one editor). She integrated one condominium (Henderson House on East Mount Royal Avenue) and was one of the first African-Americans to live in the Carrollton. She painted small oils of scenes observed through the large bowfront window on the fifth floor, the changing seasons around Hopkins Homewood campus, or the cherry blossoms in full pink in the park across Greenway. I was particularly fond of an abstract work, called “Integration,” depicting black and white silhouette figures walking shoulder to shoulder on a dappled, multicolored field.

She grew up in Pocomoke City during the Depression, a time when her father struggled to add a 10th grade at the colored school, while the last two lynchings in Maryland occurred in nearby Salisbury (1931) and Princess Anne (1933). Adele’s father was uneducated, but he knew that education was the key to a better future for his five children. Getting in the face of “the man” in those times and in that place was either sheer bravery or complete stupidity. He won the battle but lost the war (officials added a 10th grade for just one year); however, he instilled a love of learning in his young daughter, who went to the big city and graduated from Morgan State.

Adele first wrote me on Jan. 12, 1997, upon seeing an article by Laura Lippman in The Sun about Woodhole House Publishers, the imprint I started with the owners of now-defunct local bookstore chain Bibelot. (Woodhole House published Charmed Life, a collection of City Paper columns of the same name.) “At your convenience,” she wrote, “I would like to meet with you to discuss my memoir of life, as it really was, on Maryland’s Eastern Shore, where I was born and where I grew up during the Depression Era.” She expressed great pride in her manuscript, which at the time was titled “Returnings” located on the Eastern Shore).

Adele lived simply, but never denied herself whatever luxury or indulgence she desired. She enjoyed good food (we always stopped at Holly’s on Route 50 when on the Shore, or it was the Williamsburg Inn on Pulaski Highway for special occasions), dessert (a slice of cheesecake from the bookstore cafe after readings), and an occasional sherry (I’m sure that during the time I knew her the crystal carafe was never replenished with Taylor). She drove a Lincoln Continental, and I don’t believe she ever had a mortgage on the condo. When Down on the Shore published, she bought a black 2000 Infiniti I-30, cash on the barrelhead.

“You’re going to drive me around the state promoting my book,” she told me with a Southern drawl that betrayed her Shore roots. “‘Might as well be comfortable doing it.”

Picture Driving Miss Daisy, flip-flopped. I drove her to libraries, bookstores, and historical societies, from Frederick to Pocomoke City, the latter undoubtedly the most emotional of her “returnings.” Pocomoke means “black water,” named for the dark river that coursed through the city. In her memoir, Adele recalls her Uncle Ray as saying, “Old folks use t’say if ever’ last Negro ‘round here up and told all they know about the meanness white folks done to us, not even the short-half’d be told. Not going to be told neither—not til that old river rise up and speak!”

“We did not need a second car, so my wife and I agreed that we would sell it. Not just sell it, but donate the proceeds to CityLit Project, the nonprofit I founded in 2004. Not just donate the proceeds, but earmark them to help launch the nonprofit’s publishing imprint, CityLit Press. Not just launch CityLit Press, but to establish a poetry series in Adele’s honor. Not just a generic poetry series, but one that promotes young African-American writers, just like the ones Adele taught, as an everlasting effort to honor and remember the poet herself.

What better title could there be for such a series than “Black Infinity?”

I asked Kevin Gardner and Mary Zajac, perhaps the first couple to buy an 8-year-old car with under 10,000 miles, leather interior, Bose sound system, sunroof, and … first-edition copy of the original owner’s memoir. So, among the first titles published by CityLit Press in the next year or so will be the inaugural title in Black Infinity: The Adele V. Holden Series of Young African-American Poets. Poet, friend, and Pratt library staffer Reginald Harris has graciously agreed to helm the series as its editor.

A few arrangements to sell the car this March fell through. In early April, when an interested party e-mailed me from a loc.gov address (Library of Congress), I felt the perfect ending to this story starting to take shape. When it turned out that the buyer lived two blocks from where I grew up in Hampden, I assumed it was just another Smalltimore story. When the wife of the buyer opened her front door on the morning of the test dri-