

# WE DANCE

*Spin. Rise. Hold. Together.*

BY **B. BRIAN FOSTER**      PHOTOS BY *Ethan Payne*

**WE DANCE IS A LOVE STORY, DECONSTRUCTED.** Bridging the genres of ethnopoetry and as-told-to biography, the piece follows Tanya Wideman-Davis and her partner Thaddeus Davis—both professional dancers—as they make a shared life from their love of each other and as they yearn to live it as lively and lightly as they move. The Wideman Davis Dance story is also a food story, as so much of their love was crystallized while searching for, preparing, eating, not liking, loving, turning away from, and remembering this dish or that dessert. A pound cake. A sweet potato pie. A savory dinner with salmon and rice.



Many of the words you read belong to Tanya and Thaddeus (or their family members). They were recorded over several conversations spanning about two months in the summer of 2021. The words that do not belong to Tanya and Thaddeus are sampled from and inspired by Black art makers like Gwendolyn Brooks, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Zandria Robinson, and Lorna Simpson. In this way, *We Dance* is also a meditation on the immensity of Black culture and the places, histories, memories, moves, and musics that make Black life.

In food preparation, “deconstruction” is a method wherein some whole is broken down into its component parts, and those component parts are presented as their own, self-contained dish. *We Dance* moves like that. Chapter one tells the singular story of Tanya Wideman-Davis, from a Black girl who spent her days rehearsing and rehearsing and rehearsing in Chicago to a Black woman spinning and spinning and spinning around the world. Chapter two tells the singular story of Thaddeus Davis, of his roots in Montgomery, Alabama, of his ceaseless desire to rise to meet opportunities at Tuskegee and Butler University, of his family and his father, of the point where his path crossed Tanya’s. That is where chapter three comes in: It is the collective Wideman Davis Dance story, the whole that the singular parts make when they come together. How Tanya and Thaddeus have learned to bend their bodies (and lives). How they hold each other. How they are so often moving in two ways at once, both up toward their dreams and back to their memories. How they have loved, laughed, and experienced so much together. How they dance.

How do you read this? Chapter one is written from Tanya’s perspective. Chapter two is written from Thaddeus’ perspective. Chapter three brings their voices together and is rendered here in different type treatment to make it easier to follow. The Roman text is Thaddeus, the Italic text is Tanya, and the bold text represents their combined voices.

## I. Spin

From  
West—of no return  
South—of now and ever  
East—of freedom and the Mississippi

I remember the two-flat red brick on North Lotus in Chicago, its front yard for staying, its backyard for growing, its kitchen for my granny, and my granny for me. I remember watching.

Her dance, from South and Mississippi to North and factory line, I’ll never forget.  
Her spin, from countertop to stove, a time machine. I watched.  
Her hands wash sweet potatoes from the country, keep a pistol in her purse for the city, hold me for now and ever.

On Saturdays, her hands would touch, lift, and place her best—3 cups of flour that I helped sift, 6 eggs, 1 pound of butter, 2 cups of sugar, a spoonful of pure vanilla—into her best, big bowl, and—

Spin.

Then, Wait. Butter will become soft, eggs will become warm, Granny does not have to become. She is: elegant woman, soft glitz, something precious around her neck and golden around her feet, her body wrapped in rainbows, her walk, a switch that would make the world stop and spin, backwards.

Or, pour into something big enough to hold—a cup, a drawer, a sidewalk on the West Side, a Bundt pan—and bake.



Margean Williams, grandmother  
of Tanya Wideman-Davis

Then wait and watch, but know, like me, before  
I was tall enough to see Granny's tabletop, I  
dreamed enough to move West and South—to  
dance—underneath,

to tell her, "I will move North and East to  
dance," underneath the lights of many worlds.

I was 8.  
She was afraid. Her life was a mixture of one  
kind, her warmth from suns, of one kind.

I was dreaming of others,

Of something round and deep-brown or  
middle-brown or high-brown—and bright, and  
soft, like her but other.

To dance like her—firm and elegant—Black  
Girl spinning around her Black castle—the  
Arie Crown Theater—planted at the edge of a  
Chocolate City—

not waiting, but watching—something both  
still and vast, an ocean. Or a dream, a raisin in  
the sun(s) but covered

By Granny, her daughter my mother, our  
family, the Danceys,

pushing, her waves from West to East,  
I pushed myself from South to North, rise up,  
then down and seiche, and

Dance—under the tabletops, to dance at the  
Academy of Movement and Music, I  
Danced—like water, real and cool and far away,  
but close enough to touch. Our bodies were  
singing  
And dancing—a theater in Harlem, a loading  
dock, a stage, a dream is an environment too,  
spun into the shape of all the places I've been,  
dancing across the ones I hadn't—

And when I got there—

"Tanya, what did you eat today?"

"You will need to lose twenty pounds."

"You have muscles in your arms like a man."

"Eleven raisins is too many."

"A woman has curves and big shapely legs."

"It is Monday, where is your food journal?"

"Always have your own."

"Tanya, you know you can always come home."

## II. Rise

And-One-And-Two-And-Three-And—at the  
count of four you will remember.

The Bottom is a place, on the Black Side of a  
city with the First White House. Theirs had  
more room than people. Ours had the opposite,  
but love and what could be made by hands—

Let water simmer and rise  
Let sweet potatoes touch and agree  
Let family do what it does. Mine taught lessons  
worth holding:

My grandmother: take what the water gives,  
add that with the other things—butter,  
cinnamon, milk and sugar, maybe nutmeg—and  
that with 3 eggs and remember: bitter makes  
the sweet sweeter.

My grandfather: I will push souse meat or



bologna and cheese together between two Nilla wafers. I will not give you what I can teach you to get; and remember: don't take what is where you are going.

My mother: I will go where I need to and work how I have to, to help you do what you dream to, and remember: if you leave, come back, and

I wonder if my father knew it was half-past three would it have still been so quiet in there—

But for what he had left, my body, moving, down on the off-beat into a hole under the ground, at the end of a rope with no knot.

My dance, like the bodiless heads found only in dark places, or the current that courses through the jagged edges of distorted glass—

Why are they laughing? Why don't they see what I do, that even death looks beautiful in the right light, that there is a glow

to those things that can be strung up to whatever is the opposite of what can be imagined to whatever a dream that doesn't end is called,

Nightmares in hibernation. It is over. I must rise up. What is that stench in the air, I hope spring or to see three golden brown pie crusts on top of a stove still warm.

I see rows flat and open, 100 yards, and people toiling  
I feel the rush of adrenaline, the pull of muscles and people working  
I hear the cry of flesh and cowhide, and human suffering  
I know the fear of not being on time—

Of having the same blood and eyes and echo, but knowing he and I can only be strangers, speaking a different language, moving in two different worlds—

His, away.  
Mine, below until I rose above. I flexed my muscle. I fathered my son. I forgot

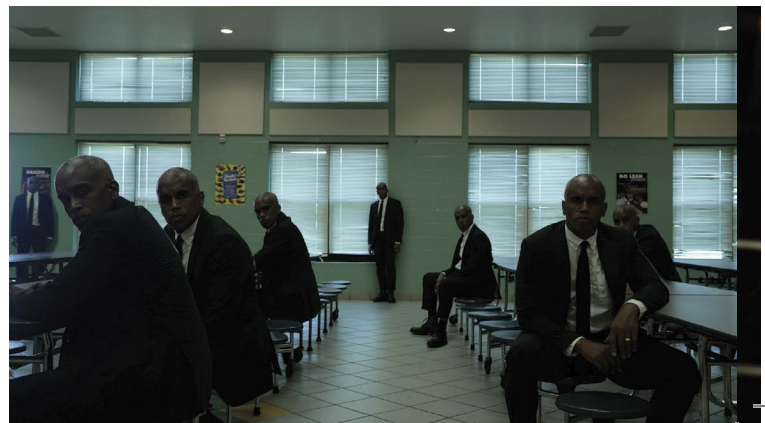
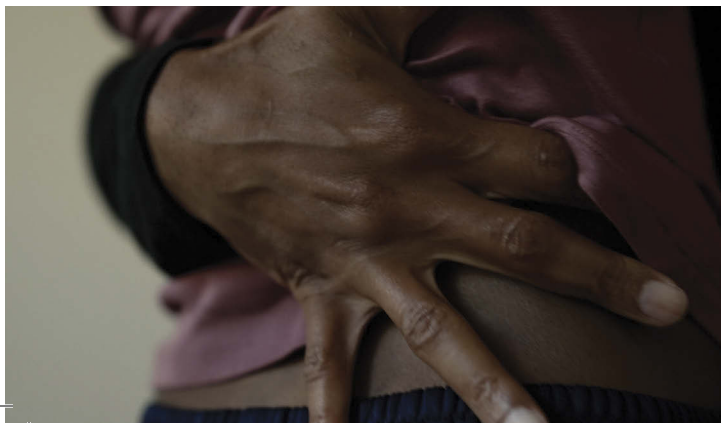
And danced—from fields and fruit cups, to Tuskegee, where I learned to dance—sometimes too ahead, sometimes too behind, but always right to keep me Dancing—a theater in Harlem, a stage, a bus, a memory is an environment too, mashed into the shape of all of the time I wish I had, dancing in between the time I didn't—

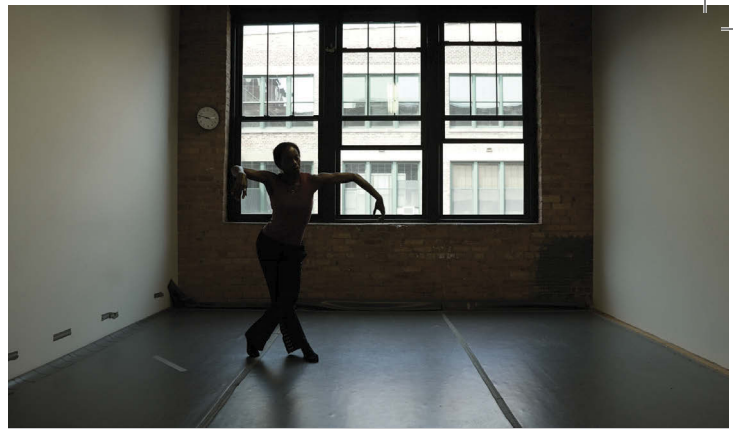
And when I got there—

“Thaddeus, what tribe are you from?”

“Where are you going?”

“You talk country.”





“Your thighs are big.”

“It’s press, not mash.”

“Why are you working so hard?”

“Go wash yo’ face.”

“Thaddeus, if you leave, come back.”

### III. Hold

*Note: The Roman text is Thaddeus; the Italic text is Tanya; and the bold text represents their combined voices.*

And she was where she had come from—North and West of me  
*And he was like he had always been—arriving late, but leaving quickly*

**Through the time it took for us to meet—**

*A package of minutes*  
A soft garment, not returned how it was left  
A funny walk, too early for her feet to turn back right  
*A night together—*

*When we were young enough to believe that whatever we needed would come to us if we chased it.*

Under lights always on, in a city that never slept, we danced, holding each other and all of the places we’d known between us.

*He was Bama and Harlem. She was Chicago and Manhattan, and fine. The city was everything and everything—our bustling kitchen, a rippling dream, a white-hot possibility, a place for us to make whatever we wanted as long as we knew how to move—from sidewalk to sidewalk and table to table, from countertop to time machine—as long as we remembered:*

Take what the water gives—about ¼ pound with salt and pepper, make hard and deep-brown on one side, keep soft and middle-brown at the bottom, watch what will rise.

*Let disparate things mix—ginger and garlic, salt and raisins, curry powder and coconut, cashews, and onion, in a bed of something soft and so high-brown it is yellow, and spin.*

And Hands were made to hold—

**And we will always keep each other—**

*And a clock cannot tell you where you are headed.*

And a compass cannot tell you when you’ve gotten there.

**And neither one of them can know, like us,**





that every way our feet would go, that every count our lives would see pass, **that every memory creeping and coming could conspire to get us here**, to gather together here, all of our environments on us and around us and in us, here.

*South and North Lotus*  
*Sweet and Potato Pie*  
*Round and Pound Cake*  
*Montgomery and Harlem*  
*Mash and Press*  
*Chicago and the Bottom*  
*City and Country*  
*Her and Him, and Us*

**Wherever we go from now to ever, those places are on, around, and in—**

**We know, the distance between leave and come back is** remember/dream—

**We knew we could build something great**

**apart but better together**, as vast as the city when night peeks and spins with pockets of flashing gold, as deep as the country when night things rise and frolic, holding pockets of flashing gold, **and we dance, like them, the heavens we’ve known,**

*Believing we’ll soon see the ones we haven’t,*

And when we get there—

*“We made the choice to change together.”*

*“We spin and rise and hold each other together.”*

*“We eat this way together.”*

**“We have made home here, together.”**

**“We dance.”** 🐦

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*Wideman Davis Dance performed “We Dance” at the 2021 Southern Foodways Alliance Fall Symposium thanks to the support of the Cockayne Fund.*

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*A film version of “We Dance,” directed by Ethan Payne, will screen at film festivals around the country in 2022. Visit [southernfoodways.org](http://southernfoodways.org) for more details.*