



## Training School for Negro Girls

**Camille Acker**

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The experiences and disquieting realizations of black women come through *Training School for Negro Girls*, in which Washington, DC, and its surroundings are treated with tension and tenderness.

Spanning girlhood to adulthood, these stories consider aspects of belonging. Characters' private fears highlight the divide between what they say and what they feel. Danger circles in subtle, original ways. As women untangle webs of desire, ingrained beliefs, history, and changing boundaries, their senses of self take center stage.

In "Ropes," a teacher bristles at her student from a rougher neighborhood, only to confront the limits of her own tolerance when she makes a snap decision that could alter the girl's life. In "Mambo Sauce," a sculptor with a white boyfriend tries to save a local fried chicken restaurant, only to learn that her gesture is an unwelcome display of her own assumptions. Code-switching leads to emotional betrayal, leaving the narrator adrift. In "Training School for Negro Girls," an aspiring socialite faces colorism and blame for an incident she didn't invite.

Beneath larger themes on gentrification and race, these stories pulse with vitality as ordinary people look for a future in a world that doesn't expect them to have one. Frustration takes varied forms—in a college applicant who is desperate to escape her peers; in a TSA agent whose mistake inspires others to worsen the moment with a lie. When a joyous outcome does happen, such as winning a piano competition, it's tainted by another girl's behavior.

Despair doesn't take over. Instead, calibrated defeats build toward endings that linger. Amid darkening scenarios, love still seeps through: in an aging mother's advice, in a father who drives through the city while lecturing his daughter, in a younger sister who watches her brother breaking.

A striking cross-section view of the capital's corners, these stories contain, and sometimes restrain, hope; in fleeting glimpses, they also reveal the beginning of a way out.

KAREN RIGBY (September/October 2018)

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