

Apology

by Pauletta Hansel

—To the 1st African-American Montessori
teacher in Cincinnati

We didn't talk much
about diversity then,

or privilege—everything
was black and white,

and remember, please,
I was 21

and I knew everything.
I thought I should know

everything, or swallow whole
what I did not, so it's a good thing

I was teaching 3- to 5-year-olds
and didn't know

how hard they were to fool.
And you made two of me—

tall and thick
and black. I thought

a little mutual respect
might be in order, here,

I had a Master's after all,
I should have known

better what it meant
to earn a thing like that—

respect, I mean— a nod
is all it took from you

to sit those children down
and put me in my place.

I'm sorry that I couldn't
stand beside you

ask for just a crumb or two
of what I didn't have. Instead

your name was chalk
under my tongue. I'd mutter:

Aren't you a little rough
for this environment?