



I AM HEARING-IMPAIRED, but I'm good at looking at people. I see a nose here, eyes there, I remember my mother's friends, and I put it all together. I love the styles of the forties, so I'll draw lace, a brooch, a hat . . . My mother was a fine seamstress and sewed all her clothes by hand. Her stitches were perfectly straight and all the same length. I try to imitate her stitches in my drawings.

I was born with the divine gift of "sight and touch"—a blessing that can clean or destroy. To make my drawings, I sit still and get very quiet. Then, a name will come into my mind, and then a face, and then that person's story will begin to come through me, and I write it down.

*Larnell Custis Butler*



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IMPROVISE IN THE AMEN CORNER



LARNELL CUSTIS BUTLER



# IMPROVISE IN THE AMEN CORNER

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# Her Name Is Pukie Lee

It is sad that Pukie Lee  
Is a woman who is the neighborhood's Drunk.

Pukie Lee Lives in a place that Looks Like  
it might have been a  
shed, not a  
house. Pukie  
Lee ought  
to be  
ashamed  
of



Her walking the streets in a staggering  
Waltz while talking to herself  
And acting the fool.

She does not mind people seeing  
Her drunk, not even the cops  
Who Laugh themselves silly  
When they see Pukie Lee drunk  
On the streets.

Folk have said that Pukie  
Lee told them she had demons  
In her head talking to her  
About situations her Mama  
Had done to keep bread  
On the table for seven kids  
Without a father.

# My Grandfather Vonnie McCoy's Land in South Mills, North Carolina

Sometimes when I have walked  
The Land of my Grandfather Vonnie  
McCoy's hope and future, a sign has  
Come into my vision eyes  
Of my grandfather Vonnie McCoy's  
Black hands working the Land  
As best he could along  
Segregated Lines of Land ownership.  
A sight comes in my vision of Land  
As flat as a Line spreading out  
In rectangular space near a water  
Canal in South Mills, North Carolina.  
I have walked my grandfather's Land in  
South Mills, North Carolina,  
And found wild places in my journeys  
That have made me stop to dig the Land  
To find my grandfather's face.





**LARNELL CUSTIS BUTLER** is an Afrocentric feminist living on a fixed income in Baltimore. With no money for art supplies, she collects sticks and twigs from the park across the street from her house, sharpens them like pencils, and dips them in India ink. She creates shadows with wet paper towels.

Butler was born in Norfolk, Virginia. Her high school art teacher recognized her talent, took her aside during his lunch period, and taught her to draw. In 1963, Butler was the first black American to receive a scholarship from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Her work has been exhibited in galleries around the country. Two of her drawings are in the permanent collection of the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia. In 2002, she was the featured poet at the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum in Baltimore, Maryland.

Larnell Custis Butler is well-known as a prolific letter writer. When former *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller was imprisoned for refusing to divulge her confidential sources, Butler sent her drawings and letters every week. She has also sent letters and drawings to newspapers, radio stations, the White House, members of Congress, and other major public figures, including Julian Bond, Marian Wright Edelman and Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr.

*Improvise in the Amen Corner* is Larnell Custis Butler's first book.



**IN LEGENDS,** the crane stands for longevity, peace, harmony, good fortune and fidelity. A high flyer, it is cherished for its ability to see both heaven and earth. These ancient, magnificent birds, so crucial in the wild as an “umbrella species,” are now endangered and must be protected.

Passager Books is dedicated to honoring the creativity of our elders, often invisible in our society, and making public the passions of a generation vital to our survival. We invite you to help us carry out our mission.

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