

## Just Shy of Stars

A small girl wanders amber waves,  
eyes pealed with heart's acute ache,  
scouring fields for something of Kansas  
that bears a likeness of her.

Garland gold, woven of wheat,  
sits atop head of tight black curls,  
as she bends to smell rich county soil,  
brushing ground with Cupid's bow mouth—  
lips lush in a way that makes earth feel blessed.

She creeps up near bison herd,  
smiles at coats of deepest brown  
surprises them to scatter with cries  
“Hey there, divine dark like me!”

Cottonwood shade invites her,  
lulled to sleep by honeybee buzz.  
Dreams of yet to happen adversity,  
of places she'll arrive just shy of stars,  
predict hard life lessons,  
foreshadow failures that startle her awake.

She plans poems about eating warm stew  
to put meat on her Midwest bones,  
broth rendered thick  
with Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes,  
seasoned rich with Gordon Parks, Aaron Douglas,  
a hearty meal to leave her hopeful  
and transform her plain uppity enough  
to demand her home town  
be more than good place to grow potatoes—

be good place to grow black girls too.

~ Annette Billings

**Annette Hope Billings** is an award-winning poet and actress from Topeka, Kansas. In addition to poetry, her work includes short stories and plays. Her poetry collection, *A Net Full of Hope*, garnered a 2015 ARTSConnect ARTY Award for Literature. A third book, *Descants for a Daughter*, is due for release this summer.