

PROSE • SUMMER 2023

## The Short Rows

Anonymous

*“You on the short rows now.”*

I was getting my syringe ready to inject the spike protein mRNA into the smooth, ebony skin overlying her left deltoid muscle. *“Huh?”* I said, having no idea what she meant. *“YOU are on the short rows NOW!”* I still had no idea what she meant, and my face above and around my mask must have looked blank as I said nothing. I looked around for some type of clue. She mercifully broke the silence. *“The car lines are getting shorter. It’s a farming term. You know, when you get to the short rows, you know that you’re almost done.”*

Such was one of my interactions during the Orange County Health Department’s Mobile COVID Vaccination Clinic in Hurdle Mills, North Carolina, on the weekend of Martin Luther King Junior’s Birthday. After her vaccine was administered and she was getting ready to drive off, she rolled down the window again, thanked me, and reminded me about *“the short rows.”* I thanked her for teaching me a new term, waved to her, and then turned to get my syringe, alcohol swab, and Band-Aid ready as the next car pulled up.

There were all types of statements and questions posed during the clinic. *“I want it in my left arm so I can swing with my right.”* *“Can I take a Tylenol if I have pains, headaches, or fever?”* *“I love to make cornbread.”* *“Do you jab?”* *“What happens if one of us has a bad reaction as we wait for the 15 minutes in our cars?”* *“Don’t make me make no pinto beans now.”* *“I don’t like shots.”* I then had a new one to add: *“You’re on the short rows now.”*

I could handle all of the other statements and questions with confidence. This last statement, however, had befuddled me and then somehow stuck with me. Maybe it was this individual’s remarkable good cheer, or perhaps it was the concern and interest she had in me that made an impression. *“Are you my vaccinator?”* she asked when she first pulled up. I had been focused on getting vaccines to the seemingly endless stream of predominantly Black American men and women coming to the clinic. Their cars and trucks started and stopped down the country road as the line progressed and then turned into our makeshift clinic of asphalt, portable tents, and orange cones. Having a chance to reflect on the woman’s statement now, I can’t help but draw meaning between the day of Martin Luther King’s birth and the approaching end to a tyrannical and destructive presidency.

*“You’re on the short rows now.”*

It’s true that we were getting to the short rows as the sun began to set behind the Baptist Church and it started getting even colder in the parking lot. The lines of cars that had been our foreground for the majority of the day were finally shrinking. Still, I can’t help but think that she and her friend must have been feeling the same way as they got their first vaccinations that day. After almost a year of the illness decimating Black Americans disproportionately, she may have been expressing hope at getting the vaccine. They were finally getting to the proverbial short rows for them. And they were happy about it, joking with me, and gladly getting their vaccines after I had given them the list of common and rare side effects required of the informed consent process. They were brave and took the shots with remarkable grace and positivity. They were ready for this pandemic and national nightmare to be over. They were happy to see the short rows.

So am I.