

AN AFRO-AMERICAN CHAPBOOK

Edited by Michael Harper

Chapbook 15

CONTENTS

- | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. M. Evans | <i>The Cage Alive with Vibrations</i> |
| 2. Isaac J. Black | <i>Four Poems</i> |
| 5. Everett Hoagland | <i>Nia: A Celebration of Purpose</i> |
| 10. Nate Johnson | <i>The Subject of the Blues</i> |
| 12. Al Young | <i>Two Poems</i> |
| 14. May Miller | <i>Three Poems</i> |
| 17. Melvin Dixon | <i>Five Poems</i> |
| 22. Ntozake Shange | <i>We Are Just Kinda That Way</i> |
| 25. Sybil Kein | <i>Two Poems</i> |
| 27. Raymond R. Patterson | <i>Dearest Phillis</i> |
| 33. Joan M. Martin | <i>Two Poems</i> |
| 34. Sonia Sanchez | <i>Six Haikus and Two Tankas</i> |
| 36. Yusef Komunyakaa | <i>Three Poems</i> |
| 40. Chris Gilbert | <i>Two Poems</i> |
| 43. George Barlow | <i>Two Poems</i> |
| 46. Dolores Kendrick | <i>Two Poems</i> |

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THE CAGE ALIVE WITH VIBRATIONS

We stand accused
stand guilty
Come
Come sister stroll the tier
Come brother come / the tier
High-domed steel on stone fused
in cold obscene embrace
Sealed as any proper grave
Come stroll the tier
Avenue of three/wall cages: night cries
Blue-denimed boulevard of broken
figures frozen by some foreign sun
Captive as the bending beams
Impaled.
Come sister stroll the silent tier
Chill to the silent
screaming of the knuckles
The wisps of smoke that never cease
Come brother
Flee the bare eyeballs
flee the men's bare eyeballs

M. Evans

FOUR POEMS**The Assassin's Poem**

On hot nights, I am impatient.
I think of the Kennedys and King,
of chess-ending escapes, of bullets
of mercury and glycerine.
I am a true professional
and I may be here for weeks.
But after nine, if the phone
rings once, that is the signal.
I will step into the dark hall
and throw the butcher knife
into the Chinaman's back.
What they don't tell me, however,
is the riddle of the doors:
the yellow is for the dead,
the red for the dying
and the last, blue, that is stuck,
that no keys will fit,
is the waiting station.

Our Story

Before the enthusiasts begin their game
of stripping beside the stream
we return to our spot to watch.
Once again, we are laughing at everybody
because we will use our own props
and write our own story.
We are behind this willow,

marveling at how we do it—
how we divide ourselves like sorcerers.
We do not need anybody
(and who would believe anyway?)
We can hear the soft,
rustling of the leaves,
the breathing in the distance
and as you hold me,
turning over the orchids
our naked torsos lift, pause,
and twist in slow-motion,
so we won't miss anything.

Poopie's Note

No, it didn't come easy.
Not the noon deception
or the sweet taking.
Perhaps, you resented
the rope and handkerchief,
all wet and stuffed in.
Or was it, finally
(after the clicking, clicking)
the clear, instant photos?
Sure, it'll give you
goose pimples but I'll say
it anyway: contortionist.
No, I will never forget.
And ponder this: where
the proof may or may not be.
P.S. I don't dare say more.

*Babe: in the morning
if you spot this attached,
predated sheet of scribbling:*

- a) immediately, take the kids
to the neighbors*
- b) leave the front
door unlocked*
- c) put on your beige skirt.*

The Ring

The woman you're photographing,
doing that figure 8, doubling it,
is someone I recognize: Casandra,
dead for three years, thirteen days.
I knew she'd be here today—
the empty glass, the fragrance in the air,
the other clues. Remember the news
of her violent death and the police
sketch that resembled me?
In the morning I looked thru
the Venetian blinds and she
was there, crying again, "I'm sorry,
sorry!" Doesn't she realize?
That I don't blame her?
That now, they have the real killer?

Dear Casandra: I've seen
all your movies and have, here,
several studio photos. You needn't
follow me, making others suspicious.
You will be noticed, you know.
It's quite safe here: wine,
the fireplace, a chance to talk.

Isaac J. Black

NIA: A CELEBRATION OF PURPOSE

(for Alice)

At Round Hill Beach

The day night was born

we searched for rare
old sea-smoothed fragments of blue
and green bottles. Glass
made from sand made from glass.

We took off our shoes
and fringed the lips of under-
tow with footprints the waves
redeemed from the firm, wet
shore. We gathered and gave each other
milk white moonstones,
smooth surfaced obsidian,
pebbles translucent as sucked rock
candy and rolled up our jeans in the raw

salty mist. The sun sank into
a violet-lipped quahaug, and grit-edged night
opened like a mussel.

By black light we
crossed over the sandbar
into camp ground.

The night day was born
we turned around and found
no footprints.

Blue Milk and Black Diamonds

The money that is *Quik* to wrap chocolate,
 like a special dark skinsoft
 lady, perverts motherhood
 and milk, making new African
 mamas feel uncivilized unless
 they mix dysentery with profit's patented

formula : *Enfamil, Lactogen,*
 and feed it to their newborn.

The same money pays
 to hear earth mother sing
 "He's Got The Whole World In His Hands"
 blue as the edge of milk

and roasts and grinds our navels
 into *cafe con leche* and sips it
 from a transparent cup
 called the globe.

Lactogen Syndrome :

marasmus, kwashiorkor
 milk white death. The Nestle Corporation's
 empty glass globe cup full of mothers'

milk is weaning black and brown babies
 on malnutrition, and Swiss chocolate Easter Eggs
 are sent to starving, bountiful Africa —
 from where we all have come — C.A.R.E.
 of missions made by A.M.E.

pennies from Inca mines and King Solomon's
 in Zaire, Namibia, Azania. Home bloods
 are buying diamonds for their betrothed.
 As black Ms. Universe hands her tear studded tiara

to South Africa there are grins
in Rhodesia like the chrome toothed grills
of cream colored *Cadillacs* and on cars
called *Continental*s
named after The Great Emancipator

In Your Red Darkroom

We put up our full-page sunday
paper poem
"Soul Food" next to your door-
large poster with the blood red word
FRELIMO and the revolutionary
black madonna cradling her
child on one knee and her
automatic weapon on the other
of her smile. Bullet nipples, the perfect beauty
of truth made flesh. In a room red as inside a womb
we put up our full-page poem
and get down on knee bone soup
remembering our child to be
born on the canal
that goes to dawn —
an aperture
no wider than
a gun barrel
or wedding band.

Nia

You

turn into the mirror,
put gold hoop rings through
the two holes in each earlobe,
put on the heirloom hair ring,
and wear your wide, brass-rimmed eye-
glasses on your round serene

Benin moon sign face.

Immensely mammalian milk and
honey mama. You rub,
reach under and rub,
the nipple on the warm melanic night
dark corona of the breast over

your heart, a preparation you learned from
all our night school sessions.

You clutch
the three week old
certificate from our completed
natural childbirth class.

The crescent smile is gone.

Hand in hand we wind back
to the rusty granite hurricane wall
built to protect the twin harbors
of Riverbed and Bedrock, Mass.
from sea storm and flood . . .

At the beach
by the seeded ring cove
you lay back, unbuttoned
your maternity blouse, your knees funneling
moonsky and sea. I looked down
at my hand and saw how

the lifeline ran from wedding band
to wristwatch. Above

the sandbar there was a gold
ring around the moon. Stretch marks
rippled from your navel
cameo of time; tributaries flowed down around
your full-womb-stretched skin;

moonlight unrolled
ancient scrolls of water
containing all our names

and your water broke
with *Nia*.

When they put you
bloody and immaculate
on your mother's diaphanous
abdomen
you kneaded your shadow;
love stared milk
and your mother cooed

awe. Now

you cry for beamed moon juice
in this dark room.

Nia, Nia.

Herispapa'spoofoo;
herishimfudgepudge : Nia,

plump and healthy on your Mama's mana
smile, I pronounce your name.

In our gift copy of his *Images Of Kin*
the poet wrote you gave birth to your parents
". . . in the afterlife of The Word . . ."

Purpose I pronounce your blood-red name.

Everett Hoagland

THE SUBJECT OF THE BLUES

The English Department's lounge held flat, regardless
 light, coffee for a dime, largely
 a low round table stacked with magazines
 no one had bothered (,) to take, and a studied
 quiet configured by who was there for what.
 People talked, but, as if, by accident.

An off-duty academician rustles paper,
 speaks, over innocent, indestructibly plastic readers
 as if clearly, he knew me from somewhere, to me:
 "Ironic thing: a pity: the poor as evil
 as the rich Ellipsis. Closed quotes.

My green knife leaped into my hand
 but I remained: cool, as Miles
 Dewey Davis etching Spain in sunshine and black lace
 and arching filigree of hot eely iron
 as if his medium were a thinning continental ice
 and his *instrumental* trumpet superheated with solo notes.

*Look: down from the highway's turning water,
 tell me what's that you see.
 Is that Zelda and my baby
 coming after me?*

*Umbrella's resting on her shoulder,
 a piece of paper's in her hand:
 'Be civil, captain mister sir,
 I have come to get my man.'*

In miniature, Ernest and F. Scott Fitzgerald,
 about as tall as paperbacks, climbed the table's leg,
 up, over its edge, to the platform the stacked mags made.

Amos-'n'-Andy-like, they repeated their scene,
ended with the punch-line: "Money makes the rich
different," drawing succinct applause.

*'Here is a season of man hours.
Here's my last handful more.
If that can't walk my man for me,
I'll have to let him go.
I'll have to let him go.'*

The subtle professor cleared his throat, existentially
having nothing more to word. He thought aloud.
My trumpet's metal voice plowed a nameless solitude—
pored and familiar, complete as a dreamed orange
basking on a matte white ledge.

Impasse. We agreed.
His being stood, up, he and his guests let go,
cadencing the blanked faces to class.
I inhabited the lounge like a loose shirt.
The table was just right for my feet.

I found a Neruda in an old Esquire, read.
I felt his short hands on my shoulders, my neck:
his long nasal breath; unapologetically
his ticking kidneys louded.
The door knocked then.

Nate Johnson

TWO POEMS**Jungle Strut***Gene Ammons, 1969*

Of all the nights, yours were greenest, Gene,
blue-breathing son of your boogie-bled dad
who, like you after him, left this dry world
a treasure tray of cocktails for the ear.

You loved making people high with your song
just as you must've loved soaring some yourself.
How high? Moon high, scaling neon heights like
an eagle humming along on silence and a bellyful.

Dumb hunters stalked you, staking you out shame-
lessly, especially when you were straddling air
pockets that, however turbulent, never blew away
your sound and rollicking command of aerial flight.

The wine poured from your jug (when you weren't
locked up in one) was aging and tasty. Bottoms up!

In A Mist*Bix Beiderbecke, 1927*

Play it one more time, Bix, so I can cascade down
your waterfall of tears and up again all on my own.

I can tell by the silence of the notes you aren't
hitting that your head's getting funny again from
sitting up all night every night after night,

banking on bad speak booze to navigate you through seas of sound on boats that leave but never dock, at least never long enough to unload your steamy cargo — a love affair with sound itself and what it can and cannot do.

Tell me, Bix, jazz darling, legendary refugee from Cincinnati Oom-Pah-Pah, is there really any difference (besides time, that is) between your 1920s twenties and the twenties of Nineteen Now? All that appetizing ear food, those saucy futuristic chords you cook up on piano to go, and heat back up on trumpet — where, if anywhere, will it end up? Better than any physicist, you already know that time, space, motion, stillness, distance and nearness are one. What you're deep into now is the whirling of planets, the whispering of the hours going by and by and by.

Tell me, doesn't that same lonesome-looking moon still pull, bringing women around in a cycle as different from man-made lunacy as bath water from gin? And isn't what you've always loved and dreamed still as American as aspirin, or atomic secrets; as American as apple pie frozen in color on a television screen?

That's the part of the mystery they're going to have to get a law out against; your secret ingredient, your mystical spray capable of shattering whole cities and countrysides while — unlike a neutron bomb — it leaves listeners intact, craving infinity. Your spirit need only be there, inside the mystery.

I, they, you, we — we all need your mistiness, Bix. Play it again please, won't you? Again and again and and again. Life is too long and always too short.

Al Young

THREE POEMS**Blazing Accusation**

*(In racial upheaval in Birmingham, Alabama, 1963
four young girls died in the blasting of a church.)*

Too early a death for those who young
have lost prophecy in blast and flame.
The broken have been assembled
as best could be to pose for burial.
The man in bleak authority intones
the word that cannot tell
when last the girls stood singing
under the sweetest tree,
how remote from nightmare
they giggled secrets believing
death was the end for the old.

After the moans are choked
and the flowers gone petalless,
the girls will be with greatgrandparents,
themselves not long in that last room.
Mothers and fathers,
grandfathers and grandmothers
still pace the waking street
though few are the footfalls
that echo where the children lie.

But walk they will
the sixty-odd more years they're due.
Beyond allotted time and self
the four of them will go
down red gullies of guilt
and alleys of dark memories,
out through stretching fields,
and up an unforgetting hill
to blazon accusation of an age.

Love on the Cape

We walked where salt blades of spray
whipped into the flesh,
and closer in moved
through white sweet mist
coupling our secret selves.

The two of us in step
would have risked no intrusion
except for a fisherman on the road
who ranged an alphabet astringent
as green persimmons to the lip.

He had had the sea, he bragged,
spit spit in her face,
split her thighs,
and damned her strumpet bottoms
that drop beneath the edge of the world.

Later his drunken frenzy held
the inn captive dragon for attack.
He slobbered his life's miracles

and adoration of the wife
who had left him for a shipping clerk.

In this hysteria we focused love,
the rare instant burned clear
etched by candle flame.
We leaned together, ate oysters raw
until I bit upon a pearl.

Nuptial Calendar

Neither your lips moving
with the established word
nor the high noon bell
(in accordance with ring and book)
making public and licit
the consorting bed can tell your years,
you lovers newly bound and hopeful.
Your past is a child's kiss
given without discrimination;
the present, star nucleus
speeding toward comet visibility
half-century from now;
tomorrow hangs a death room mirror
shrouded from familiar faces.
Go bankrupt this once
and buy the appointed moment.
The span of passion's wing
is designed for high flight;
your forever could well be
two swans mated for life.

FIVE POEMS

Getting Rocks

Reading clouds beyond the road
I calculate our distance, survey
the space between our clothes
where rising curves and mountain
tug for air, touch, release.

You drive to the hairpin slope,
hesitate, turn up and in. We ride
on every naked fear you have,
and discover that men like us
are not all granite, shale,
deceptive quartz, or
glittering layers of mica.

From here you see the whole world
differently: brownskin,
tufts of black grass.
And many times I have given myself
to summits like these.
Ride in, ride high;
ride until the clouds break.

You will learn to read rain, to
follow the white gravel it leaves.

Hungry Travel

1.

Carolina mountains to Pee Dee town,
sharecropping,
my boy father led mules and siblings.
He plowed for fifty cents a week
until the day his house burned down.

"Everything lost in the flames,"
he tells my mother. "I don't know
how to give any more."
He takes her like the mule,
riding groin shotgun
back to Carolina cinders.

2.

She croons, "Beautiful dreamer
wake unto me," as his arms lock
to her hips. He says "freak,
you must be some kind of freak."
Her hands reach for him, hold nothing.

In my twenty-fifth year,
his eyes avoiding mine, his voice:
"You're still my son," as if his silent
years between us were reasons to forget.
But I remember the song, and I know
by heart her broken breath sung solo.

3.

This poem for five of us
pulling from one chain.
Our metallic cries etch the hearthstone.
Wet bandages fall from our empty mouths.
We hunger for any words that cure.

4.

Nights while he's asleep
my mother kisses him.
"He can't fight me then. And alone
I can make love to him to me."
Her eyes fill with warning:
"You'll get used to it, like I did."

At twelve my scout uniform
stains with forest seeds, above me
the crooning of white oak, pine, and boy:
"Just one more time, baby. One more time."

Until now.

5.

My man friend and I
return together.

My father shoots up from the table,
away from his woman silent now, grey.
His forehead ridges, eyes hammer,
turn back to the yams and greens
as if we violated their ground of
vegetable, children, dream.

My words gather into knives,
the hunger slices: "I'm still your son."
As if his silent years between us
were reasons to forget, were reasons to forget.

Grandmother: Crossing Jordan

In rivers of hospital sheets
circling the shore
of your brown body, you sink

for the third time,
ready to rise alone
on the other side.

I reach out for you
and pull and pull
until your wrinkled skin
tears from the bones of elbow,
arm, wrist, and fingers.

How it hangs empty,
loose. A glove
too large
for my hand.

Etymology: A Father's Gift

My father searches the dictionary
for clues, surveys our gathering
and teaches us the strength
of consonants in words like beg:

“To ask for as charity, to ask
a favor, to ask earnestly, entreat.
To insist in asking for something
to which one has no claim or right.”

The youngest daughter coaxes
him to kiss, her lips reaching empty;
the elder girl in the soft curl of dance;
my mother in patches of premature grey,
nervous fingers caressing space.
The first son in a long jazz solo;
the third boy and I
at any stranger's crotch
stuttering for his root.

Chill

for Didier

Mosquitoes in August
then September flies swarm inside
to savor dinner scraps
and the cartilage of raw ears.

Caught fat and full at the screen
they smash drunk, bulbous eyes
looking out. Their wings whine
against the enemy of wire
as your skin dries tight.

You bathe, then shiver for sleep.
Birch branches claw at the window,
reach for you, yellow and curl
at the touch of glass or skin.
Morning you find the lingering

breath of nightmare on every mirror
and outside
where sparrows angle away
and don't look back.

Melvin Dixon

"Youths of both sexes wear rings in the nose and lower lip, with small sticks, reed tubes, or porcupine quills stuck through the cartilage of the ears."

Captain Theophilus Conneau

(A Slaver's Logbook, or 20 Year's Residence in Africa - 1828)

WE ARE JUST KINDA THAT WAY

when ringling bros. shows up to the madison square garden
 the white people just go/ in their c b radios/ in their
 macdonald's hat/ with their save america t-shirts &
 those children who score higher on I.Q. tests for the
 white children who speak english/
 when the hockey games absorb all america's attention
 in winter/ they go with their fists clutched & their
 tongues battering their women who don't know a puck
 from
 a 3 year old harness racer/ they go & sweat in fierce
 anger/ these factories/ these middle management
 positions/
 make madison square garden/ the temple of the primal
 scream/ oh how they love blood/ oh/ how they dont even
 dress for the occasion/ all inconspicuous & pink
 now if willie colon come there
 if/ we say/ the fania all stars gonna be there
 in that nasty fantasy of the city council
 that nasty barn where police outnumber men of good will
 where the hot dogs are not even hebrew national
 the bread is stale/ & the ice cream verging on custard
 even in such a place where dance is an obscure notion
 where one's joy is good cause for a boring chat with

the pinkerton guard/ where the halls lead nowhere & "back
to yr seat/ folks"/ when alla one's budget for cruisin/ one's
budget for that special dinner with you know who/ the
one you wd like to love you/ when yr whole reasonable
allowance for leisure activity/ buys you a seat/ where
what's goin on dont matter/ cuz you so high up/ you might
be

in seattle/ honolulu/ even in such a tawdry space
one of william burrough's dreams of heaven/ what mussolini
wda found appropriate for the next world/ where voerster
& his

pals wd spit & expect black folks to lick it up/ in such a
place/ i've seen miracles
oh yes/ the miracles/ the commodores/ muhammed ali/
bob marley

& these women who upset alla 7th avenue with their glow/
how the gold in their braids is new in this world of hard
hats & men with the grace of wounded buffaloes/ how these
women in silk & satin/ in bodies reekin of good love comin/
these women/ make this barn/ this insult to good taste/
a foray to paradise/ we dress up/ we dress up/ cuz we got
good manners/

cd you really ask dr. funkenstein to come all that way &
greet him in the clothes you sweep yr kitchen in/
no

cd you say to mohammed ali/ well/ i just didnt have time to
change

you see i have a job/ & then i went jogging & we/ you know
it's just madison square garden/
my dear/ you know that wont do

we honor our guests/ if it costs us all we got
we'll show the ones who give us the grace of real heat
we know where that came from/

when stevie wonder sings/ he don't want us looking like
wa aint got no common sense/ he wants us to be as lovely

as we really are/ so we strut & reggae/ i seen some doin the
 jump up/ i myself just got happy/ but i'm tellin you
 one thing for sure
 we fill up where we at
 no police
 no cheap beer
 no nasty smellin baño
 no hallways fulla derelicts & hustlers
 no escalators that keep takin us away/ always away
 from who we love
 gonna interfere with alla this beauty
 if it waznt for us
 in our latino chic/ our rasta-fare/ our outer space funk suits
 & all the rest i never seen/ tho my daddy cd tell you bout
 them fox furs & stacked heels/ the diamonds &
 marie-antoinette
 wigs/ it's not cuz we got money
 it's not cuz if we had money we wd spend it on luxury
 it's just when you gotta audience with the pope/ you
 look yr best/ when you gonna see the queen of england/
 you polish yr nails/ when you gonna see one of them/ &
 you know who i mean
 when we see/ if we gotta see
 neruda/ if we gotta/ see victor jara/ if we gotta see/ neto
 when we do see stevie/ cecil taylor/ sun-ra/ or A.I.R.
 when sonora matancera/ cãetano/ exile one/ conjunto libr e
 when they come to us/ we gotta look right
 gods/ alla the gods come in & outta us at whim
 now/ how wd we feel if we sittin there in a housedress/
 it's always been true
 we are a grateful mass/ we a 'muito sympatico' people
 we wanna give up more than just a few bucks for a ticket
 these deities/ of ours/ our creators/ workin in this hell-hole
 called madison square garden
 they gotta really know/ we gotta make em feel

we dont just do this for any ol body
we're doin this for you
we dress up
is our way of sayin/ you gettin the very best
we cant do less/ we love too much to be stingy/
you give too much to be loved ordinary
we simply have good manners/ & addictions to beauty/
we gotta addiction to joy/ we gotta dress up
we gotta show the world/ we gotta corner on the color/
happiness just jump right outta us/ & we lookin good.

Ntozake Shange

TWO POEMS

“Mo Oulé Mourri Dan Lac Lá”

(New Orleans, 1884)

From the roof of her shanty
on Lake Pontchartrain
Madam Laveau spit into
the eye of a deadly storm.
Hurricane came up with
no respect for those furious
voodoo spirits.

Winds pushed waves around
like two crazy monsters.
“I want to die in that lake.”
she said, commanding all. Then
as fury met fury, her cabin
splintered boards; she stood up
and walked to the shore.
Over the instant stillness
a weak sun spoke apologies
on her long black hair.

from Water Poems

chestnut lilies
float in silence.
peach sky
lingers above.
Dawn colors
kiss the water,
succulent, sweet.
sun blooms.
I loose my skirt
to swim like
half a lemon.
my brown nipples
are the only
seeds.

Sybil Kein

DEAREST PHILLIS

*Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,
Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,*

Lord Dartmouth, you do me great honor.
I am your humble servant, yet fear
London these days does overspend
Its charity on so small a poetess
As I dare claim to be.

Your kind regard I hope in time
To merit, and shall remain ever
Anxious to improve the faults of youth
And want of greater study
You now discern.

What notice I may own, in truth
I owe my mistress, Susannah Wheatley
Dear wife of John Wheatley, tailor
Residing in King Street, Boston.
Indeed, I owe her my life.

She took me—a child of seven, I'm told—
Into her keep; a wretched slave
Ignorant of who I was, but half alive,
Speechless from sufferings
So deep I cannot name them still.

She gave me my life,
A refuge in her home, her own dear children,
Mary and Nathaniel, to nurse my pain,
Dispel my fears with smiles, until
My childish mind opened in their sun.

And I through imitation strove to bind
Myself to them: their words the first
Glad sounds I made; their manners I

I am unhappily free.
Of that first Home, I remember
Nothing—no face, no scene,
No Tongue, no creed,
No one.

A curtain
Hides that past, withholding
Who I was before my birth
Upon a dock in Boston
In 1761.

Well known the tales of sufferings
In the Trade.
Of my misfortunes
I
Am dumb.

What ruthless slavers came
To raid our town? Did some chief weave a coffel
Out of war, with captured princes, noblemen, at times,
Set like black jewels in that wretched band,
The mothers weeping, their babes plucked from their
arms?

The young ones herded off like lambs
Bleating in the dark,
The tread on weary tread
That led us groaning on—that Journey
To a slave port by the sea

Where we are sorted, traded,
Branded; made ready for our fate;
The feeble cast aside,
The women culled
To serve the captain's plate.

What din of tongues! What loathsome
Smells! Chained in the cramped, dark hold!

The storm battered ship
Bearing us on. The fear
We should be eaten in the end.

And some, when brought on deck,
Jump overboard; and mothers
Smother their young; and others
Will to die, singing a death song, trusting
The soul to fly swiftly back home; and some will
not to die.

But I remember none
Of that Journey, how I came from Africa,
By God's Will, that kindles me—
A small dark flame, an emblem,
Burning for souls not free

—Though unsteadily in such harsh winds
Our Boston winters make
The price of glorious New England spring.
Yet I do persevere, but dread the night—know terror
If I wake without some light, as often when I'm ill.

However well I school myself, I fear
The dark will smother me—and keep
A candle near, to pass the time
In thoughts, like some lost nightingale
Borne on Fancy's wings.

Such times, towards dawn, when dreams
Outrace my pen—this need
Imagination has to clothe the dark
In palliaments of light—
I will compose a poem.

Perhaps God keeps the past
From me. He holds all curtains shut
On all we do not know, disclosing

In His time,
Eternity,

Though rebel minds, uneasy in restraint,
May cast strange images
Of future scenes or past
Forgotten times, imperfectly.
Thus to me frequent and unbidden comes

A figure in a doorway
Greeting the dawn. I feel
It is my mother. Her arms lift.
She pours from her hands
A liquid ribbon kindled by the sun.

Though English soil proclaims me
Free, in truth, I am a servant,
Yet am served, bound to those I love,
Enriched by every strand. Few are as blessed as I
In serving God or Man.

What is the lot of slaves? This
Ocean voyage? My presence here?
Held by subtler chains, free men
Suffer harsher ways. But I
Am braceleted by love

And lacking such stays, would be
Swept away, surely, and have drowned.
From this true Liberty—from an Awakened Soul—
Have come my poems in gratitude,
As that one on the late Reverend Mr. Whitfield

Sweet Angel of Christ
In Cambridge,
Chaplain to the Countess of Huntingdon,
Gaining her sympathy for a book
Soon published here in London.

May it dispel some
Doubt in the African
Here recently set free
—Which state is best; and plead,
Modestly, for his Humanity;

That from Instruction
Much may come to merit praise,
A darker intellect,
A deeper soul
Towards God may rise

—As we observe, well,
Abroad—even in Boston
Where frequently, if not all free,
Go many a dark face in the crowd
And steps forth occasionally an ingenious African.

That I am judged
An argument for my race,
My Lord, kind gentlemen and ladies,
New-found friends, you honor me;
And may I speak with a convincing tongue

At home as here, for Reasoned Liberty,
There resting much Good Will on either side,
Much we share. The same sea
Does touch us both;
Unbound the channels of the winds;

This globe, our common ground,
One sun—Sweet Sol—does shine upon
Under the all-seeing Eye of God. May He in time
Redress all Wrong and spread
His Peace over the Colonies and the Crown.

Raymond R. Patterson

TWO POEMS

memories and rainy nights

i weep strange scenarios
beneath blue dusk
and powdered people/
 see us melt into one another
 like waterfalls
 and quiet thoughts.

dark faces in half-light/
sweet flights of fantasy/
acts too eager to believe.

i touch your eyes
and dream . . .
but night takes you/
 suddenly/
 in silent anxious drops
 of bitter rain.

song for Noel Pointer

jungle rhythms,
dance my name in tintone bells.
beckon me in
with drumsounds and male noises . . .
shadow-dreams against my breasts.
i will appear.
but if i can give no answer,
send the mystic flute—

silver phallus of the sun-king.
make its cries my only sound.
i cannot resist
ebony nights and warrior calls.
bid dark trees
cloister me in chorus.
like a bronze goddess,
i will writhe inside
these deep
low
primordial
moans.

Joan M. Martin

SIX HAIKUS AND TWO TANKAS

1.
my body waiting
for the sound of yo/ hands is loud
as a prairie song.
2.
baby. you are sweet
as watermelon juice run/
ning down my wide lips.

3.

let me be your flute
fashioning laughter from this
bamboo wilderness.

4.

i am settling down
on you where we are both soft
and taste like butter.

5.

away from you these
sheets are mummy tapes i twist
and turn myself in.

6.

you have stamped your hour
on me, tatoood yourself on
me like sheets of silk.

1.

man. i am trying
to love you fully in such
a way so when you
run the wind from yo/legs leap
out and kiss my opening thighs.

2.

his voice used to sing
when he talked to me used to
smile rivers. and i
would slide on eyes with him down
his morning breakfast of sails.

Sonia Sanchez

THREE POEMS**Captain Nobones' Threnody**

Os digo.

It's out of my hands now. The hole's been dug;
a black blindfold cut from a lover's nightgown.

Os digo.

The gypsy gazes into her crystalball
& a rooster drops dead in the dust; one note of rumba
still burns in the skull.

Os digo.

The white-haired orator has fallen asleep in his armchair;
ataractic. Your brother, Miguel, his head
rests on a downtown barcounter.

Os digo.

The informer I bet has his hand on your sister's leg.
I want to wash my hands; at least seven times today
the guards have chased children from their chimeric crow's
nests

shouting your name. They're calling you a saint out there;
but as far as I can see there's no blood
on the leaves of mangoes in the courtyard.

Os digo.

The seal's affixed, my hands tied, feet nailed to the floor.
What can I say?

Os digo.

Even your mother has taken that gold crucifix
from around her neck & dropped it into a beggar's tincup.

False Leads

*As I walked out and in again
From the dead the living came.
Five there were, six there'll be,
And seven shall set this maiden free.*
Afro-American, Riddle

Hey! Mister Bloodhound Boss
I hear you're looking for Slick Sam
The Freight Train Hopper.
They tell me he's a crackshot;
shoot a cigarette out of a man's mouth
thirty paces of an owl's call.
This morning I glimpsed red
in that treeline.
Aïe, aïe, mo gagnin toi.
Wise not to let night catch you out there.
You can get so close to a man
you can almost put your hands on him.
They say Slick Sam's a mindreader:
knows what you're gonna do
before you think it.
He can lead you into quicksand
under a veil of stars & swamp gas.
Now you know me, Uncle T,
I wouldn't tell you no lie.
That man knows these piney woods;
he's roadless in cottonmouth country.
Aïe, aïe, no gagnin toi.
Your life could be worth
less than a hole in a plug nickel.
I bet old Slick Sam knows
about bloodhounds & black pepper;
how to put a bobcat into a crocus sack.

from Family Tree

1.

I know better
than a whip
across my back,
her eyes swearing
all the pain. Her father
cut down so young
in this stonegarden.
She knows how easy death
first takes root
in the sweet mouth
of a love song.
She knows that long chain
drags in the red dust.
Geechee
bloodholler—
my mother
married at 13,
with my ear pressed
against the drum
of heartbeat.

2.

When my father speaks
of childhood,
sunlight strikes
a ploughshare.
Across the cottonfield
Muddy Waters' voice
rings true as a bone-song
when my father speaks
of Depression winters
& a wheel within a wheel;
my greatgrandmama's name

always turns up
like a twenty dollar
goldpiece.
Born a slave,
how old her hands were.
When my father speaks
of hanging trees
I know
all the old prophets
of the human spirit
tied down in
the electric chair.

6.
Family tree,
taproot,
genealogy of blues.
We've seen the workhorse
limp across a ghost field
& heard the rifle crack.
Felt birds struggle
like a black disc
bloodflowered
in the heart
of the southern sun.
Fatback jazz horn
biographies, mahogany cellos.
Someone close to us
dragged away in dawnlight
here in these iron years.
Downhome brass tambourines,
an octave of pain
clear as tonal blood
on the silent mirror.

Yusef Komunyakaa

TWO POEMS

Now

i park the car because i'm happy
because if everyone parked we'd have a street party,
because the moon is full
it is orange, the sky is closer—
it would be wrong to drive into it.
this is the first day of summer—
everyone is hanging out,
women walk by in their bodies so mellow
i feel i'm near a friend's house.

the small white flakes of the headlights
sweat for a second on the storefronts,
in the windows, darkened afterhours,
a reflection stares back
looking more like me than me.
i reach to touch
and the reflection touches me.
everything is perfect—
even my skin fits.

hanging out,
the taillights of the turning cars
are fires, going out
are the spaces of roses flowered
deeper in themselves, i close my eyes
and am flowered deeper in myself.
on highland street a walking figure
i can't make out, a face

behind a bag of groceries, free arm swinging in
the air the wave of a deep red
fluid shifting to and fro.

at the vegetarian restaurant
i see it's Michael the Conga Drummer—
been looking for him 2 months.
he asks me, "what's happening."
i love his fingers,
when we shake hands i mix his grip
with the curve of my father's
toting cantaloupe in the house from the market.
we are two griots at highland and ashland streets.
i answer him in parable—
peeling the orange that i've been carrying
it seems all my life,
i hand him half.

Song for Living

i find my voice, strangely
bright and happy, in my nephew Michael's smiling
9 yr old, unwashed brown
laughter-face in the antiseptic airport light of lansing
where he waited for my plane
when i, frayed at ends, came in with bags lost somewhere,
he, anyway, stood in the knee-holed space of his jeans
body twisting into language, chanting
"life is bold, life is really
bold," as he grabbed my hand.

his voice echoed back thru my travel,
when riding a small twin prop to home
i felt it ramble uncertain to flight, and swirl

in argument with air, its body
buffeted in the dark december blizzard
above the faint midwestern lights
where its rote noise ceased
and my heart stopped-
cold, heard the insistent cry
of air, a changed wind, this far-off drone
a low pitched cuss prayer
where the plane-wings seemed to beat for breath.

but now later, in the land locked usual
numbed surface of waiting room buzz,
after death brushed my ears
i sense the turbulence of living,
and look into Michael's eye twinkled jokester face to hear
a drone high up in the mind
where i think his happy words, his bodily chant—
a prayer to live by

Chris Gilbert

TWO POEMS

Facing the Prairie

for Nancy Fast

deep in her pupils
the black hills
red willow bark
in the pipe fragrant air
a bonnet
resolute hoops & plumes

& the keen hunkpapa lance
honed in the sun
stands looking back
from the ridge of her nose

& in her delicate cheeks
variegated rawhide boxes
the easy breath of eagle-wing fans
beaded bands hanging from lakota braids
a pony ghost-dancing
on the undulating
bluestem wheat & buffalo

& over her chin
the powder
the little white
the prairie
where reeds & songbirds
flute the sturdy heritage
of painted sons & daughters

& at her mouth
where history & lyrics live
& the wish beams
a sunfast sunkissed rosebud
parting its petals
to the great sky

American Plethora: MacCorporate MacDream

come come come
to the mustard & the ketchup
the pickles & the lettuce
come together come to us
for macmiracles & maclife
we will macknowledge you
come believe

follow our clown through
the great golden arches
he'll do it all for you
the world is a filet-o-fish
a quarter pounder with cheese
a raspberry shake with fries
believe believe

we'll mince the idea
with the onions

spread the notion
on the egg macmuffins
spike the coke with the vision

believe believe
that when you sleep
you'll macdream
when you wake
you'll macstretch
macbrush your teeth
& come come come
to us for coffee

james brown
kate smith
the carpenters
& fleetwood mack
will macsing our macsong

come come & sing
our rare destiny
look to the macfuture citizens
macsteak & maclobster
salt & pepper
for your souls
cream & sugar
for your bodies
come come come

we're the biggest macs
on earth
machustling the world
from the back seats
of our long black maccadillacs

all all
all we macwant is maceverything

George Barlow

TWO POEMS

Josephine in the Jeu de Paume

for Gaga

My mother sitting in a hard sill
of light unlocking the room
of soft treasures to her Sunday
eyes: the Cézanne Vase still as
air, set beside its reproduction
oozing blue-white oils into the
nostrils of her mind; filling
the pit of her hand and the palm
of her black and curious eye.
She delights at the sight of what
was and Will Be and watches
motionlessly the art of motion
stilled by a metaphor. She cannot
speak. The ghost of herself is but
a gesture of quiet light that she
alone controls, she only can see.
Distantly, she smiles and rises.
Outside, old men in black berets
and dry skins walk humming
in deep-pebbled sun.

Frustrated Genius

Words salt the blue-linen cafe
and tabled voices placed accurately
in clothes of meat and garlic.

I wonder if the poem will come
through a dangling chatter
of eaters, through the hearing
and shout of sunlight shattering
glass, through the kinship of the
waiter's tall and standing eye?

No, the poem is jealous.
It won't accept warm food and cold
desserts for compromise.

I know. I saw it turn the corner
of the room a minute ago, bend
and laugh and sit by the bar.

Dolores Kendrick

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