

## **An African American Poetry Reader: Renaissance and Resistance**

Inside this packet is an abbreviated and non-chronological tour of over three centuries of African American poetry. Read through the packet and choose **at least three poems by different poets** that interest you to spend time with and prepare for discussion. While re-reading your chosen poems, consider the following questions as they apply:

\*What kind of relationship does race play with other identities, such as other non-white and white racial identities, as well as with gender, sexual orientation, and class?

\*What kind of relationship do the poets imagine with you, the reader?

\*How would you describe the familial and romantic relationships that are depicted in these poems?

\*What kind of work do these poets depict? What is important to you about the ways they portray this labor?

\*How do the poets interact with and re-imagine American history?

\*How do these poets see themselves in relation to world events, cultural institutions, or to other transnational struggles?

\*How do the poets interact with other forms of art and other artists? How do they play with poetic form?

\*How do the poets interact with or re-imagine the natural world?

\*What role does memory play in these poems?

\*How do these poets respond to violence? What kinds of violence appear in these poems?

\*Do any of your poems contradict or seem to respond to other poems in this collection?

\*How do these poets create or insist on joy?

**Compiled by Paisley Rekdal, University of Utah, 2020**

## Table of Contents

1. Patricia Smith, "Incendiary Art," and "The Stuff of Astounding: A Poem for Juneteenth"
2. June Jordan, "Letter to the Local Police," "July 4, 1974"
3. Countee Cullen, "Incident," "Yet Do I Marvel"
4. Phyllis Wheatley, "To S.M. A Young African Painter, On Seeing His Works," "On Being Brought from Africa to America"
5. George Moses Horton, "On Liberty and Slavery"
6. William Waring Cuney, "No Images"
7. Anonymous, John Henry
8. Abel Meeropol and Billie Holiday, "Strange Fruit"
9. Robert Johnson, "Sweet Home Chicago"
10. Bessie Smith, "Need a Little Sugar in My Bowl"
11. Harryette Mullen, "[go on girl, sing your song]," "[kills bugs dead]"
12. Cameron Awkward-Rich, "Lucille's Roaches"
13. Sonia Sanchez, "Poem for July 4, 1994," "Ballad"
14. Yusef Komunyakaa, "My Father's Love Letters," "Envoy to Palestine," "Facing It"
15. Anne Spencer, "The Wife-Woman"
16. Lucille Clifton, "jasper texas 1998," "why some people be mad at me sometimes," "won't you celebrate with me"
17. Danez Smith, "Dinosaurs in the Hood"
18. Claude McKay, "If We Must Die," "The Lynching"
19. Claudia Rankine, from *Citizen*
20. Major Jackson, "On Disappearing"
21. Camille Dungy, "Frequently Asked Questions: 10"
22. Jericho Brown, "Bullet Points," "The Tradition"
23. Amiri Baraka, "Dope," "Preface to a 20 Volume Suicide Note"
24. Bob Kaufman, "O-Jazz-O War Memoir: Jazz, Don't Listen To It At Your Own Risk"
25. Douglas Kearney, "Sho"
26. Ross Gay, "A Small, Needful Fact," "To the Fig Tree on 9<sup>th</sup> and Christian"
27. Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Boy Died in My Alley," "The Lovers of the Poor," "The Near-Johannesburg Boy," "We Real Cool"
28. Wanda Coleman, "Requiem for a Nest," "American Sonnet (10)"
29. Terrance Hayes, "The Golden Shovel," "American Sonnet"
30. Jay Wright, "Love in the Weather's Bells," "The Healing Improvisation of Hair"
31. Reginald Shepherd, "You, Therefore"

32. Tracy K. Smith, "Declaration," "Wade in the Water"
33. Kevin Young, "Reward"
34. Tyehimba Jess, "let's face it," "Blind Boone's Vision"
35. Marilyn Nelson, "How I Discovered Poetry," "Thompson and Seaman Vows, African Union Church," "The Continental Army"
36. Thylas Moss, "Botanical Fanaticism," "Interpretation of a Poem by Frost"
37. Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson, "To Madame Curie," "To the Negro Farmers of the United States"
38. Rita Dove, "The Great Palaces of Versailles," "Daystar," "Flash Cards"
39. Robin Coste Lewis, "The Mothers"
40. Langston Hughes, "Letter," "Let America Be America Again," "Johannesburg Mines"
41. Natasha Trethewey, "Enlightenment," "Kitchen Maid with Supper at Emmaus, or The Mulata"
42. Evie Shockley, "Clare's Song"
43. Allison Joseph, "Thirty Lines About the 'Fro'"
44. A. Van Jordan, "A Tempest in a Teacup," "'Que Sera Sera'"
45. Robert Hayden, "Middle Passage," "Frederick Douglass," "Those Winter Sundays"
46. Carl Phillips, "Blue," "Something to Believe In"
47. Melvin Dixon, "Heartbeats"
48. Phillip B. Williams, "Do-Rag"
49. Nikky Finney, "The Aureole"
50. Audre Lorde, "Who Said it Was Simple," "Sisters in Arms," "Now"
51. Etheridge Knight, "The Idea of Ancestry"
52. Camille Rankine, "Inheritance"
53. Margaret Walker, "For My People"

**Content Warning: Several of the poems depict violence and include racist language.**

## Incendiary Art

Patricia Smith, 1955--

The city's streets are densely shelved with rows  
of salt and packaged hair. Intent on air,  
the funk of crave and function comes to blows

with any smell that isn't oil—the blare  
of storefront chicken settles on the skin  
and mango spritzing drips from razored hair.

The corner chefs cube pork, decide again  
on cayenne, fry in grease that's glopped with dust.  
The sizzle of the feast adds to the din

of children, strutting slant, their wanderlust  
and cussing, plus the loud and tactless hiss  
of dogged hustlers bellowing past gusts

of peppered breeze, that fatty, fragrant bliss  
in skillet. All our rampant hunger tricks  
us into thinking we can dare dismiss

the thing men do to boulevards, the wicks  
their bodies be. A city, strapped for art,  
delights in torching them—at first for kicks,

to waltz to whirling sparks, but soon those hearts  
thud thinner, whittled by the chomp of heat.  
Outlined in chalk, men blacken, curl apart.

Their blindly rising fume is bittersweet,  
although reversals in the air could fool  
us into thinking they weren't meant as meat.

Our sons don't burn their cities as a rule,  
born, as they are, up to their necks in fuel.

Read Patricia Smith's poem "The Stuff of Astounding: A Poem for Juneteenth" in the *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/18/style/juneteenth-celebration.html>

Read more about Patricia Smith here: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/patricia-smith>

### **Letter to the Local Police**

JUNE JORDAN, 1936-2002

Dear Sirs:

I have been enjoying the law and order of our community throughout the past three months since my wife and I, our two cats, and miscellaneous photographs of the six grandchildren belonging to our previous neighbors (with whom we were very close) arrived in Saratoga Springs which is clearly prospering under your custody

Indeed, until yesterday afternoon and despite my vigilant casting about, I have been unable to discover a single instance of reasons for public-spirited concern, much less complaint

You may easily appreciate, then, how it is that I write to your office, at this date, with utmost regret for the lamentable circumstances that force my hand

Speaking directly to the issue of the moment:

I have encountered a regular profusion of certain unidentified roses, growing to no discernible purpose, and according to no perceptible control, approximately one quarter mile west of the Northway, on the southern side

To be specific, there are practically thousands of

the aforementioned abiding in perpetual near riot  
of wild behavior, indiscriminate coloring, and only  
the Good Lord Himself can say what diverse soliciting  
of promiscuous cross-fertilization

As I say, these roses, no matter what the apparent  
background, training, tropistic tendencies, age,  
or color, do not demonstrate the least inclination  
toward categorization, specified allegiance, resolute  
preference, consideration of the needs of others, or  
any other minimal traits of decency

May I point out that I did not assiduously seek out  
this colony, as it were, and that these certain  
unidentified roses remain open to viewing even by  
children, with or without suitable supervision

(My wife asks me to append a note as regards the  
seasonal but nevertheless seriously licentious  
phenomenon of honeysuckle under the moon that one may  
apprehend at the corner of Nelson and Main

However, I have recommended that she undertake direct  
correspondence with you, as regards this: yet  
another civic disturbance in our midst)

I am confident that you will devise and pursue  
appropriate legal response to the roses in question  
If I may aid your efforts in this respect, please  
do not hesitate to call me into consultation

Respectfully yours,

**July 4, 1974**

JUNE JORDAN, 1936-2002  
*Washington, D.C.*

At least it helps me to think about my son  
a Leo/born to us

(Aries and Cancer) some  
sixteen years ago  
in St. John's Hospital next to the Long Island  
Railroad tracks  
Atlantic Avenue/Brooklyn  
New York

at dawn

which facts  
do not really prepare you  
(do they)

for him

angry  
serious  
and running through the darkness with his own

becoming light

Information about June Jordan can be found here:  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/june-jordan>

### **Incident**

Countee Cullen, 1903-1946

Once riding in old Baltimore,  
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,  
I saw a Baltimorean  
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,  
And he was no whit bigger,  
And so I smiled, but he poked out  
His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."

I saw the whole of Baltimore

From May until December;  
Of all the things that happened there  
That's all that I remember.

### **Yet Do I Marvel**

Countee Cullen, 1903-1946

I doubt not God is good, well-meaning, kind,  
And did He stoop to quibble could tell why  
The little buried mole continues blind,  
Why flesh that mirrors Him must some day die,  
Make plain the reason tortured Tantalus  
Is baited by the fickle fruit, declare  
If merely brute caprice dooms Sisyphus  
To struggle up a never-ending stair.  
Inscrutable His ways are, and immune  
To catechism by a mind too strewn  
With petty cares to slightly understand  
What awful brain compels His awful hand.  
Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:  
To make a poet black, and bid him sing!

Information about Countee Cullen from the Poetry Foundation:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/countee-cullen>

### **To S. M. A Young African Painter, On Seeing His Works**

PHYLLIS WHEATLEY, 1753-1784

TO show the lab'ring bosom's deep intent,  
And thought in living characters to paint,  
When first thy pencil did those beauties give,  
And breathing figures learnt from thee to live,  
How did those prospects give my soul delight,  
A new creation rushing on my sight?  
Still, wond'rous youth! each noble path pursue,  
On deathless glories fix thine ardent view:  
Still may the painter's and the poet's fire



To aid thy pencil, and thy verse conspire!  
And may the charms of each seraphic theme  
Conduct thy footsteps to immortal fame!  
High to the blissful wonders of the skies  
Elate thy soul, and raise thy wishful eyes.  
Thrice happy, when exalted to survey  
That splendid city, crown'd with endless day,  
Whose twice six gates on radiant hinges ring:  
Celestial Salem blooms in endless spring.  
Calm and serene thy moments glide along,  
And may the muse inspire each future song!  
Still, with the sweets of contemplation bless'd,  
May peace with balmy wings your soul invest!  
But when these shades of time are chas'd away,  
And darkness ends in everlasting day,  
On what seraphic pinions shall we move,  
And view the landscapes in the realms above?  
There shall thy tongue in heav'nly murmurs flow,  
And there my muse with heav'nly transport glow:  
No more to tell of Damon's tender sighs,  
Or rising radiance of Aurora's eyes,  
For nobler themes demand a nobler strain,  
And purer language on th' ethereal plain.  
Cease, gentle muse! the solemn gloom of night  
Now seals the fair creation from my sight.

### **On Being Brought from Africa to America**

PHYLLIS WHEATLEY, 1753-1784

'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,  
Taught my benighted soul to understand  
That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:  
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.  
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
"Their colour is a diabolic die."  
Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,  
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

Information on Phyllis Wheatley can be found here:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/phillis-wheatley>

## **On Liberty and Slavery**

BY GEORGE MOSES HORTON, 1798-1883

Alas! and am I born for this,  
To wear this slavish chain?  
Deprived of all created bliss,  
Through hardship, toil and pain!

How long have I in bondage lain,  
And languished to be free!  
Alas! and must I still complain—  
Deprived of liberty.

Oh, Heaven! and is there no relief  
This side the silent grave—  
To soothe the pain—to quell the grief  
And anguish of a slave?

Come Liberty, thou cheerful sound,  
Roll through my ravished ears!  
Come, let my grief in joys be drowned,  
And drive away my fears.

Say unto foul oppression, Cease:  
Ye tyrants rage no more,  
And let the joyful trump of peace,  
Now bid the vassal soar.

Soar on the pinions of that dove  
Which long has cooed for thee,  
And breathed her notes from Afric's grove,  
The sound of Liberty.

Oh, Liberty! thou golden prize,  
So often sought by blood—  
We crave thy sacred sun to rise,  
The gift of nature's God!

Bid Slavery hide her haggard face,

And barbarism fly:  
I scorn to see the sad disgrace  
In which enslaved I lie.

Dear Liberty! upon thy breast,  
I languish to respire;  
And like the Swan unto her nest,  
I'd like to thy smiles retire.

Oh, blest asylum—heavenly balm!  
Unto thy boughs I flee—  
And in thy shades the storm shall calm,  
With songs of Liberty!

Information on George Moses Horton here: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/george-moses-horton>

### **No Images**

BY WILLIAM WARING CUNEY, 1906-1976

She does not know  
her beauty,  
she thinks her brown body  
has no glory.

If she could dance  
naked  
under palm trees  
and see her image in the river,  
she would know.

But there are no palm trees  
on the street,  
and dish water gives back  
no images.

Information on William Waring Cuney here:  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-waring-cuney>

## **John Henry**

BY ANONYMOUS

When John Henry was a little tiny baby  
Sitting on his mama's knee,  
He picked up a hammer and a little piece of steel  
Saying, "Hammer's going to be the death of me, Lord, Lord,  
Hammer's going to be the death of me."

John Henry was a man just six feet high,  
Nearly two feet and a half across his breast.  
He'd hammer with a nine-pound hammer all day  
And never get tired and want to rest, Lord, Lord,  
And never get tired and want to rest.

John Henry went up on the mountain  
And he looked one eye straight up its side.  
The mountain was so tall and John Henry was so small,  
He laid down his hammer and he cried, "Lord, Lord,"  
He laid down his hammer and he cried.

John Henry said to his captain,  
"Captain, you go to town,  
Bring me back a TWELVE-pound hammer, please,  
And I'll beat that steam drill down, Lord, Lord,  
I'll beat that steam drill down."

The captain said to John Henry,  
"I believe this mountain's sinking in."  
But John Henry said, "Captain, just you stand aside--  
It's nothing but my hammer catching wind, Lord, Lord,  
It's nothing but my hammer catching wind."

John Henry said to his shaker,  
"Shaker, boy, you better start to pray,  
'Cause if my TWELVE-pound hammer miss that little piece of steel,  
Tomorrow'll be your burying day, Lord, Lord,  
Tomorrow'll be your burying day."

John Henry said to his captain,  
"A man is nothing but a man,  
But before I let your steam drill beat me down,  
I'd die with a hammer in my hand, Lord, Lord,  
I'd die with a hammer in my hand."

The man that invented the steam drill,  
He figured he was mighty high and fine,  
But John Henry sunk the steel down fourteen feet  
While the steam drill only made nine, Lord, Lord,  
The steam drill only made nine.

John Henry hammered on the right-hand side.  
Steam drill kept driving on the left.  
John Henry beat that steam drill down.  
But he hammered his poor heart to death, Lord, Lord,  
He hammered his poor heart to death.

Well, they carried John Henry down the tunnel  
And they laid his body in the sand.  
Now every woman riding on a C and O train  
Says, "There lies my steel-driving man, Lord, Lord,  
There lies my steel-driving man."

### **Strange Fruit**

Lyrics and music by Abel Meerpool, published as "Bitter Fruit" in *The New York Teacher*, 1937

Recorded by Billie Holiday, 1939

Southern trees bear a strange fruit  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root  
Black bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze  
Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant South  
The bulgin' eyes and the twisted mouth

Scent of magnolias sweet and fresh  
Then the sudden smell of burnin' flesh

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck  
For the rain to gather  
For the wind to suck  
For the sun to rot  
For the tree to drop  
Here is a strange and bitter crop

### **Sweet Home Chicago**

Robert Johnson, 1911-1938

First recorded 1936

Oh, baby don't you want to go?  
Oh, baby don't you want to go?  
Back to the land of California  
To my sweet home Chicago

Oh, baby don't you want to go?  
Oh, baby don't you want to go?  
Back to the land of California  
To my sweet home Chicago

Now one and one is two  
Two and two is four  
I'm heavy loaded, baby  
I'm booked, I gotta go

Cryin' baby  
Honey don't you want to go?  
Back to the land of California  
To my sweet home Chicago

Now two and two is four  
Four and two is six  
You gonna keep monkeyin' round with your friend-boy, you gonna get your  
Business all in a trick

But I'm cryin' baby  
Honey don't you wanna go?  
Back to the land of California  
To my sweet home Chicago

Now six and two is eight  
Eight and two is ten  
Friend-boy, she trick you one time  
She sure gonna do it again

But I'm cryin' hey, hey  
Baby don't you want to go?  
To the land of California  
To my sweet home Chicago

I'm goin' to California  
From there to Des Moines Iowa  
Somebody will tell me that you  
Need my help someday, cryin'

Hey, hey  
Baby don't you want to go?  
Back to the land of California  
To my sweet home Chicago

### **Need a Little Sugar in My Bowl**

Bessie Smith, 1931

Tired of bein' lonely, tired of bein' blue  
I wished I had some good man, to tell my troubles to  
Seem like the whole world's wrong  
Since my man's been gone

I need a little sugar in my bowl  
I need a little hot dog on my roll  
I can stand a bit of lovin', oh so bad  
I feel so funny, I feel so sad

I need a little steam-heat on my floor  
Maybe I can fix things up, so they'll go  
What's the matter hard papa  
Come on and save your mama's soul  
'Cause I need a little sugar, in my bowl, doggone it  
I need a some sugar in my bowl

I need a little sugar in my bowl  
I need a little hot dog between my rolls  
You gettin' different, I've been told  
Move your finger, drop something in my bowl

I need a little steam-heat on my floor  
Maybe I can fix things up, so they'll go  
Get off your knees, I can't see what you're drivin' at  
It's dark down there looks like a snake!  
C'mon here and drop somethin' here in my bowl  
Stop your foolin' and drop somethin' in my bowl

**[go on sister sing your song]**

BY HARRYETTE MULLEN, 1953 —

go on sister sing your song  
lady redbone señora rubia  
took all day long  
shampooing her nubia

she gets to the getting place  
without or with him  
must I holler when  
you're giving me rhythm

members don't get weary  
add some practice to your theory  
she wants to know is it a men thing  
or a him thing

wishing him luck  
she gave him lemons to suck



told him please dear  
improve your embouchure

**[Kills bugs dead.]**

BY HARRYETTE MULLEN, 1953—

Kills bugs dead. Redundancy is syntactical overkill. A pin-prick of peace at the end of the tunnel of a nightmare night in a roach motel. Their noise infects the dream. In black kitchens they foul the food, walk on our bodies as we sleep over oceans of pirate flags. Skull and crossbones, they crunch like candy. When we die they will eat us, unless we kill them first. Invest in better mousetraps. Take no prisoners on board ship, to rock the boat, to violate our beds with pestilence. We dream the dream of extirpation. Wipe out a species, with God at our side. Annihilate the insects. Sterilize the filthy vermin.

Information about Harryette Mullen here:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/harryette-mullen>

**Lucille's Roaches**

BY CAMERON AWKWARD-RICH, 198?--

*After Lucille Clifton*

O winged walker,  
motley brood  
& brood underneath  
the underneath. You,  
formidable residual,  
derelict carried  
to this country  
by the dread Atlantic  
wind. What did you see  
to make but yourself  
& yourself? Foul  
architect, teeming Queen  
of rot. Whereas you  
survive. Whereas your death  
is an industry. Whereas  
on the television  
in this century

of television  
a woman wears you  
as a living jewel,  
rubied carapace  
on a gold leash.  
Whereas *beauty*  
was never meant  
to be your name—  
O harbinger  
of harbingers.  
O little, unending night.  
Whereas *murder*, too,  
was never right—  
they're just a sound  
for what we do  
to the dark. O  
a sound I fear  
is the only sound  
I know.

Information on Cameron Awkward-Rich here:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/cameron-awkward-rich>

### **Poem for July 4, 1994**

Sonia Sanchez, 1934--

*For President Václav Havel*

It is essential that Summer be grafted to  
bones marrow earth clouds blood the  
eyes of our ancestors.  
It is essential to smell the beginning  
words where Washington, Madison, Hamilton,  
Adams, Jefferson assembled amid cries of:

"The people lack of information"  
"We grow more and more skeptical"

"This Constitution is a triple-headed monster"  
"Blacks are property"

It is essential to remember how cold the sun  
how warm the snow snapping  
around the ragged feet of soldiers and slaves.  
It is essential to string the sky  
with the saliva of Slavs and  
Germans and Anglos and French  
and Italians and Scandinavians,  
and Spaniards and Mexicans and Poles  
and Africans and Native Americans.  
It is essential that we always repeat:  
    we the people,  
    we the people,  
    we the people.

2.

"Let us go into the fields" one  
brother told the other brother. And  
the sound of exact death  
raising tombs across the centuries.  
Across the oceans. Across the land.

3.

It is essential that we finally understand:  
this is the time for the creative  
human being  
the human being who decides  
to talk upright in a human  
fashion in order to save this  
earth from extinction.

This is the time for the creative  
Man. Woman. Who must decide  
that She. He. Can live in peace.  
Racial and sexual justice on  
this earth.

This is the time for you and me.  
African American. Whites. Latinos.  
Gays. Asians. Jews. Native  
Americans. Lesbians. Muslims.  
All of us must finally bury  
the elitism of race superiority  
the elitism of sexual superiority  
the elitism of economic superiority  
the elitism of religious superiority.

So we welcome you on the celebration  
of 218 years Philadelphia. America.

So we salute you and say:  
Come, come, come, move out into this world  
nourish your lives with a  
spirituality that allows us to respect  
each other's birth.  
come, come, come, nourish the world where  
every 3 days 120,000 children die  
of starvation or the effects of starvation;  
come, come, come, nourish the world  
where we will no longer hear the  
screams and cries of womens, girls,  
and children in Bosnia, El Salvador,  
Rwanda...AhAhAhAh AHAHAHHHHHH

Ma-ma. Dada. Mamacita. Baba.  
Mama. Papa. Momma. Poppi.  
The soldiers are marching in the streets  
near the hospitals but the nurses say  
we are safe and the soldiers are  
laughing marching firing calling  
out to us i don't want to die i  
am only 9 yrs old, i am only 10 yrs old  
i am only 11 yrs old and i cannot  
get out of the bed because they have cut  
off one of my legs and i hear the soldiers  
coming toward our rooms and i hear  
the screams and the children are

running out of the room i can't get out  
of the bed i don't want to die Don't  
let me die Rwanda. America. United  
Nations. Don't let me die.....

And if we nourish ourselves, our communities  
our countries and say

no more hiroshima  
no more auschwitz  
no more wounded knee  
no more middle passage  
no more slavery  
no more Bosnia  
no more Rwanda

No more intoxicating ideas of  
racial superiority  
as we walk toward abundance  
we will never forget

the earth  
the sea  
the children  
the people

For *we the people* will always be arriving  
a ceremony of thunder  
waking up the earth  
opening our eyes to human  
monuments.

And it'll get better  
it'll get better  
if *we the people* work, organize, resist,  
come together for peace, racial, social  
and sexual justice  
it'll get better  
it'll get better.

## Ballad

Sonia Sanchez, 1934--

*(after the spanish)*

forgive me if i laugh  
you are so sure of love  
you are so young  
and i too old to learn of love.

the rain exploding  
in the air is love  
the grass excreting her  
green wax is love  
and stones remembering  
past steps is love,  
but you. you are too young  
for love  
and i too old.

once. what does it matter  
when or who, i knew  
of love.  
i fixed my body  
under his and went  
to sleep in love  
all trace of me  
was wiped away

forgive me if i smile  
young heiress of a naked dream  
you are so young  
and i too old to learn of love.

Information about Sonia Sanchez can be found here: <https://poets.org/poet/sonia-sanchez>

## My Father's Love Letters

Yusef Komunyakaa, 1947

On Fridays he'd open a can of Jax  
After coming home from the mill,  
& ask me to write a letter to my mother  
Who sent postcards of desert flowers  
Taller than men. He would beg,  
Promising to never beat her  
Again. Somehow I was happy  
She had gone, & sometimes wanted  
To slip in a reminder, how Mary Lou  
Williams' "Polka Dots & Moonbeams"  
Never made the swelling go down.  
His carpenter's apron always bulged  
With old nails, a claw hammer  
Looped at his side & extension cords  
Coiled around his feet.  
Words rolled from under the pressure  
Of my ballpoint: Love,  
Baby, Honey, Please.  
We sat in the quiet brutality  
Of voltage meters & pipe threaders,  
Lost between sentences . . .  
The gleam of a five-pound wedge  
On the concrete floor  
Pulled a sunset  
Through the doorway of his toolshed.  
I wondered if she laughed  
& held them over a gas burner.  
My father could only sign  
His name, but he'd look at blueprints  
& say how many bricks  
Formed each wall. This man,  
Who stole roses & hyacinth  
For his yard, would stand there  
With eyes closed & fists balled,  
Laboring over a simple word, almost  
Redeemed by what he tried to say.

## Envoy to Palestine

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA, 1947 —

I've come to this one grassy hill  
in Ramallah, off Tokyo Street,  
to a place a few red anemones  
& a sheaf of wheat on Darwish's grave.  
A borrowed line transported me beneath  
a Babylonian moon & I found myself  
lucky to have the shadow of a coat  
as warmth, listening to a poet's song  
of Jerusalem, the hum of a red string  
Caesar stole off Gilgamesh's lute.  
I know a prison of sunlight on the skin.  
The land I come from they also dreamt  
before they arrived in towering ships  
battered by the hard Atlantic winds.  
Crows followed me from my home.  
My coyote heart is an old runagate  
redskin, a noble savage, still Lakota,  
& I knew the bow before the arch.  
I feel the wildflowers, all the grasses  
& insects singing to me. My sacred dead  
is the dust of restless plains I come from,  
& I love when it gets into my eyes & mouth  
telling me of the roads behind & ahead.  
I go back to broken treaties & smallpox,  
the irony of barbed wire. Your envoy  
could be a reprobate whose inheritance  
is no more than a swig of firewater.  
The sun made a temple of the bones  
of my tribe. I know a dried-up riverbed  
& extinct animals live in your nightmares  
sharp as shark teeth from my mountains  
strung into this brave necklace around  
my neck. I hear Chief Standing Bear  
saying to Judge Dundy, "I am a man,"  
& now I know why I'd rather die a poet  
than a warrior, tattoo & tomahawk.



## Facing It

Yusef Komunyakaa, 1947--

My black face fades,  
hiding inside the black granite.  
I said I wouldn't,  
dammit: No tears.  
I'm stone. I'm flesh.  
My clouded reflection eyes me  
like a bird of prey, the profile of night  
slanted against morning. I turn  
this way—the stone lets me go.  
I turn that way—I'm inside  
the Vietnam Veterans Memorial  
again, depending on the light  
to make a difference.  
I go down the 58,022 names,  
half-expecting to find  
my own in letters like smoke.  
I touch the name Andrew Johnson;  
I see the booby trap's white flash.  
Names shimmer on a woman's blouse  
but when she walks away  
the names stay on the wall.  
Brushstrokes flash, a red bird's  
wings cutting across my stare.  
The sky. A plane in the sky.  
A white vet's image floats  
closer to me, then his pale eyes  
look through mine. I'm a window.  
He's lost his right arm  
inside the stone. In the black mirror  
a woman's trying to erase names:  
No, she's brushing a boy's hair.

Information on Yusef Komunyakaa can be found here:  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/yusef-komunyakaa>

### **The Wife-Woman**

BY ANNE SPENCER, 1882-1975

Maker-of-sevens in the scheme of things  
From earth to star;  
Thy cycle holds whatever is fate, and  
Over the border the bar.  
Though rank and fierce the mariner  
Sailing the seven seas,  
He prays, as he holds his glass to his eyes,  
Coaxing the Pleiades.

I cannot love them; and I feel your glad  
Chiding from the grave,  
That my all was only worth at all, what  
Joy to you it gave.  
These seven links the *Law* compelled  
For the human chain—  
I cannot love *them*; and *you*, oh,  
Seven-fold months in Flanders slain!

A jungle there, a cave here, bred six  
And a million years,  
Sure and strong, mate for mate, such  
Love as culture fears;  
I gave you clear the oil and wine;  
You saved me your hob and hearth—  
See how *even* life may be ere the  
Sickle comes and leaves a swath.

But I can wait the seven of moons,  
Or years I spare,  
Hoarding the heart's plenty, nor spend  
A drop, nor share—  
So long but outlives a smile and  
A silken gown;

Then gaily I reach up from my shroud,  
And you, glory-clad, reach down.

Information about Anne Spencer here: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/anne-spencer>

**jasper texas 1998**

Lucille Clifton, 1936-2010

for j. byrd

i am a man's head hunched in the road.  
i was chosen to speak by the members  
of my body. the arm as it pulled away  
pointed toward me, the hand opened once  
and was gone.

why and why and why  
should i call a white man brother?  
who is the human in this place,  
the thing that is dragged or the dragger?  
what does my daughter say?

the sun is a blister overhead.  
if i were alive i could not bear it.  
the townsfolk sing we shall overcome  
while hope bleeds slowly from my mouth  
into the dirt that covers us all.  
i am done with this dust. i am done.

**why some people be mad at me sometimes**

Lucille Clifton, 1936-2010

they ask me to remember  
but they want me to remember  
their memories  
and i keep on remembering  
mine.

## won't you celebrate with me

Lucille Clifton, 1936-2010

won't you celebrate with me  
what i have shaped into  
a kind of life? i had no model.  
born in babylon  
both nonwhite and woman  
what did i see to be except myself?  
i made it up  
here on this bridge between  
starshine and clay,  
my one hand holding tight  
my other hand; come celebrate  
with me that everyday  
something has tried to kill me  
and has failed.

Information about Lucille Clifton can be found here:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/lucille-clifton>

## Dinosaurs in the Hood

BY DANEZ SMITH, 198? —

Let's make a movie called *Dinosaurs in the Hood*.  
*Jurassic Park* meets *Friday* meets *The Pursuit of Happyness*.  
There should be a scene where a little black boy is playing  
with a toy dinosaur on the bus, then looks out the window  
& sees the T. Rex, because there has to be a T. Rex.

Don't let Tarantino direct this. In his version, the boy plays  
with a gun, the metaphor: black boys toy with their own lives,  
the foreshadow to his end, the spitting image of his father.  
Fuck that, the kid has a plastic Brontosaurus or Triceratops  
& this is his proof of magic or God or Santa. I want a scene

where a cop car gets pooped on by a pterodactyl, a scene

where the corner store turns into a battle ground. Don't let  
the Wayans brothers in this movie. I don't want any racist shit  
about Asian people or overused Latino stereotypes.  
This movie is about a neighborhood of royal folks —

children of slaves & immigrants & addicts & exiles — saving their town  
from real-ass dinosaurs. I don't want some cheesy yet progressive  
Hmong sexy hot dude hero with a funny yet strong commanding  
black girl buddy-cop film. This is not a vehicle for Will Smith  
& Sofia Vergara. I want grandmas on the front porch taking out raptors

with guns they hid in walls & under mattresses. I want those little spitty,  
screamy dinosaurs. I want Cicely Tyson to make a speech, maybe two.  
I want Viola Davis to save the city in the last scene with a black fist afro pick  
through the last dinosaur's long, cold-blood neck. But this can't be  
a black movie. This can't be a black movie. This movie can't be dismissed

because of its cast or its audience. This movie can't be a metaphor  
for black people & extinction. This movie can't be about race.  
This movie can't be about black pain or cause black people pain.  
This movie can't be about a long history of having a long history with hurt.  
This movie can't be about race. Nobody can say nigga in this movie

who can't say it to my face in public. No chicken jokes in this movie.  
No bullets in the heroes. & no one kills the black boy. & no one kills  
the black boy. & no one kills the black boy. Besides, the only reason  
I want to make this is for that first scene anyway: the little black boy  
on the bus with a toy dinosaur, his eyes wide & endless

his dreams possible, pulsing, & right there.

Information on Danez Smith here: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/danez-smith>

### **If We Must Die**

BY CLAUDE MCKAY, 1889-1948

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,

While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursèd lot.  
If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!  
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!  
What though before us lies the open grave?  
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

### **The Lynching**

BY CLAUDE MCKAY, 1889-1948

His spirit is smoke ascended to high heaven.  
His father, by the cruelest way of pain,  
Had bidden him to his bosom once again;  
The awful sin remained still unforgiven.  
All night a bright and solitary star  
(Perchance the one that ever guided him,  
Yet gave him up at last to Fate's wild whim)  
Hung pitifully o'er the swinging char.  
Day dawned, and soon the mixed crowds came to view  
The ghastly body swaying in the sun:  
The women thronged to look, but never a one  
Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue;  
And little lads, lynchers that were to be,  
Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee.

Information on Claude McKay can be found here:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/claude-mckay>

*from Citizen: "You are in the dark, in the car..."*

BY CLAUDIA RANKINE, 1963--

/

You are in the dark, in the car, watching the black-tarred street being swallowed by speed; he tells you his dean is making him hire a person of color when there are so many great writers out there.

You think maybe this is an experiment and you are being tested or retroactively insulted or you have done something that communicates this is an okay conversation to be having.

Why do you feel okay saying this to me? You wish the light would turn red or a police siren would go off so you could slam on the brakes, slam into the car ahead of you, be propelled forward so quickly both your faces would suddenly be exposed to the wind.

As usual you drive straight through the moment with the expected backing off of what was previously said. It is not only that confrontation is headache producing; it is also that you have a destination that doesn't include acting like this moment isn't inhabitable, hasn't happened before, and the before isn't part of the now as the night darkens and the time shortens between where we are and where we are going.

/

When you arrive in your driveway and turn off the car, you remain behind the wheel another ten minutes. You fear the night is being locked in and coded on a cellular level and want time to function as a power wash. Sitting there staring at the closed garage door you are reminded that a friend once told you there exists a medical term — John Henryism — for people exposed to stresses stemming from racism. They achieve themselves to death trying to dodge the build up of erasure. Sherman James, the researcher who came up with the term, claimed the physiological costs were high. You hope by sitting in silence you are bucking the trend.

/

When the stranger asks, Why do you care? you just stand there staring at him. He has just referred to the boisterous teenagers in Starbucks as niggers. Hey, I am standing right here, you responded, not necessarily expecting him to turn to you.

He is holding the lidded paper cup in one hand and a small paper bag in the other. They are just being kids. Come on, no need to get all KKK on them, you say.

Now there you go, he responds.

The people around you have turned away from their screens. The teenagers are on pause. There I go? you ask, feeling irritation begin to rain down. Yes, and something about hearing yourself repeating this stranger's accusation in a voice usually reserved for your partner makes you smile.

/

A man knocked over her son in the subway. You feel your own body wince. He's okay, but the son of a bitch kept walking. She says she grabbed the stranger's arm and told him to apologize: I told him to look at the boy and apologize. And yes, you want it to stop, you want the black child pushed to the ground to be seen, to be helped to his feet and be brushed off, not brushed off by the person that did not see him, has never seen him, has perhaps never seen anyone who is not a reflection of himself.

The beautiful thing is that a group of men began to stand behind me like a fleet of bodyguards, she says, like newly found uncles and brothers.

/

The new therapist specializes in trauma counseling. You have only ever spoken on the phone. Her house has a side gate that leads to a back entrance she uses for patients. You walk down a path bordered on both sides with deer grass and rosemary to the gate, which turns out to be locked.

At the front door the bell is a small round disc that you press firmly. When the door finally opens, the woman standing there yells, at the top of her lungs, Get away from my house. What are you doing in my yard?

It's as if a wounded Doberman pinscher or a German shepherd has gained the power of speech. And though you back up a few steps, you manage to tell her you have an appointment. You have an appointment? she spits back. Then she pauses. Everything pauses. Oh, she says, followed by, oh, yes, that's right. I am sorry.

I am so sorry, so, so sorry.

Information on Claudia Rankine here:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/claudia-rankine>



## **On Disappearing**

MAJOR JACKSON, 1968--

I have not disappeared.  
The boulevard is full of my steps. The sky is  
full of my thinking. An archbishop  
prays for my soul, even though  
we met only once, and even then, he was  
busy waving at a congregation.  
The ticking clocks in Vermont sway

back and forth as though sweeping  
up my eyes and my tattoos and my metaphors,  
and what comes up are the great paragraphs  
of dust, which also carry motes  
of my existence. I have not disappeared.  
My wife quivers inside a kiss.  
My pulse was given to her many times,

in many countries. The chunks of bread we dip  
in olive oil is communion with our ancestors,  
who also have not disappeared. Their delicate songs  
I wear on my eyelids. Their smiles have  
given me freedom which is a crater  
I keep falling in. When I bite into the two halves  
of an orange whose cross-section resembles my lungs,

a delta of juices burst down my chin, and like magic,  
makes me appear to those who think I've  
disappeared. It's too bad war makes people  
disappear like chess pieces, and that prisons  
turn prisoners into movie endings. When I fade  
into the mountains on a forest trail,  
I still have not disappeared, even though its green façade  
turns my arms and legs into branches of oak.  
It is then I belong to a southerly wind,  
which by now you have mistaken as me nodding back  
and forth like a Hasid in prayer or a mother who has just

lost her son to gunfire in Detroit. I have not disappeared.

In my children, I see my bulging face  
pressing further into the mysteries.

In a library in Tucson, on a plane above  
Buenos Aires, on a field where nearby burns  
a controlled fire, I am held by a professor,  
a general, and a photographer.  
One burns a finely wrapped cigar, then sniffs  
the scented pages of my books, scouring  
for the bitter smell of control.  
I hold him in my mind like a chalice.  
I have not disappeared. I swish the amber  
hue of lager on my tongue and ponder the drilling  
rigs in the Gulf of Alaska and all the oil-painted plovers.

When we talk about limits, we disappear.  
In Jasper, TX you can disappear on a strip of gravel.

I am a life in sacred language.  
Termites toil over a grave,  
and my mind is a ravine of yesterdays.  
At a glance from across the room, I wear  
September on my face,  
which is eternal, and does not disappear  
even if you close your eyes once and for all  
simultaneously like two coffins.

Information on Major Jackson here: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/major-jackson>

### **Frequently Asked Questions: 10**

CAMILLE T. DUNGY, 1972 —

*Do you see current events differently because you were raised by a black father and are married to a black man?*

I am surprised they haven't left already —

things have gotten downright frosty, nearly unbearable.  
A mob of them is apparently mouthing off outside

when I put down my newspaper and we all gather  
to stand beside my daughter in the bay

of kitchen windows. *Quiscalus quiscula*:

this name sounds like a spell which, after its casting,  
will make things crumble into a complement

of unanswerable questions. Though, if you need me

to tell you God's honest truth, I know nothing

but their common name the morning we watch them attack  
our feeder. I complain about the mess they leave. Hulls

I'll have to sweep up or ignore. My father —

who I am thankful is still alive — says *We could use  
a different kind of seed*. A simple solution. We want that

brown bird with the shock of red: the northern flicker.  
We want western bluebirds, more of the skittish

finches. But mostly we get grackle grackle grackle

all day long. Can it be justifiable to revile these  
harbingers? They scoff all we offer

and — being too close and too many — scare

other birds away. My husband says, *Look  
at all those crackles*. I almost laugh at him,

but the winter air does look hurtful loud

around the black flock. Like static is loud when it sticks

sheets to sheets so they crackle when pulled  
one from another. And sting. My father — who is older now  
than his older brothers will ever be — promises  
he will solve the problem of the grackles  
and leaves the window to search for his keys.  
The dawn sky — blue breaking into blackness —  
is what I see feathering their bodies. The fence  
is gray. The feeder is gray, the aspen bark. Gray  
hulls litter the ground. But the grackles,  
their passerine claws — three facing forward, one turned  
back — around the roost bar of the feeder, are  
so bright within their blackness, I pray they will stay.

Information on Camille T. Dungy can be found here:  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/camille-t-dungy>

### **Bullet Points**

JERICHO BROWN, 1976--

I will not shoot myself  
In the head, and I will not shoot myself  
In the back, and I will not hang myself  
With a trashbag, and if I do,  
I promise you, I will not do it  
In a police car while handcuffed  
Or in the jail cell of a town  
I only know the name of  
Because I have to drive through it  
To get home. Yes, I may be at risk,

But I promise you, I trust the maggots  
Who live beneath the floorboards  
Of my house to do what they must  
To any carcass more than I trust  
An officer of the law of the land  
To shut my eyes like a man  
Of God might, or to cover me with a sheet  
So clean my mother could have used it  
To tuck me in. When I kill me, I will  
Do it the same way most Americans do,  
I promise you: cigarette smoke  
Or a piece of meat on which I choke  
Or so broke I freeze  
In one of these winters we keep  
Calling worst. I promise if you hear  
Of me dead anywhere near  
A cop, then that cop killed me. He took  
Me from us and left my body, which is,  
No matter what we've been taught,  
Greater than the settlement  
A city can pay a mother to stop crying,  
And more beautiful than the new bullet  
Fished from the folds of my brain.

### **The Tradition**

Jericho Brown, 1976--

*Aster. Nasturtium. Delphinium.* We thought  
Fingers in dirt meant it was our dirt, learning  
Names in heat, in elements classical  
Philosophers said could change us. *Star Gazer.*  
*Foxglove.* Summer seemed to bloom against the will  
Of the sun, which news reports claimed flamed hotter  
On this planet than when our dead fathers  
Wiped sweat from their necks. *Cosmos. Baby's Breath.*  
Men like me and my brothers filmed what we  
Planted for proof we existed before  
Too late, sped the video to see blossoms

Brought in seconds, colors you expect in poems  
Where the world ends, everything cut down.  
*John Crawford. Eric Garner. Mike Brown.*

Information about Jericho Brown can be found here:  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/jericho-brown>

## Dope

Amiri Baraka, 1934-2014

uuuuuuuuuuuu  
uuuuuuuuuuuu  
uuuuuuuuuuuu uu ray light morning fire lynch yet  
uuuuuuuu, yester-pain in dreams  
comes again. race-pain, people our people  
our people  
everywhere . . . yeh . . . uuuuu, yeh  
uuuuu. yeh  
our people  
yes people  
every people  
most people  
uuuuuu, yeh uuuuu, most people  
in pain  
yester-pain, and pain today  
(Screams) ooowow! ooowow! It must be  
the devil  
(jumps up like a claw stuck him) oooo  
wow! oooowow! (screams)

It must be the devil  
It must be the devil  
it must be the devil  
(shakes like evangelical sanctify  
shakes tambourine like evangelical sanctify  
in heat)

ooowow! ooowow! yeh, devil, yeh, devil  
ooowow!

Must be the devil must be the devil  
(waves plate like collection) mus is mus is  
mus is  
mus is be the devil, cain be rockefeller  
(eyes roll  
up batting, and jumping all the way around  
to face the  
other direction) caint be him, no lawd  
aint be dupont, no lawd, cain be, no lawd,  
no way  
noway, naw saw, no way jose — cain be  
them rich folks  
theys good to us theys good to us theys  
good to us theys  
good to us theys good to us, i know, the  
massa tolt me  
so, i seed it on channel 7, i seed it on  
channel 9 i seed  
it on channel 4 and 2 and 5. Rich folks  
good to us  
poor folks aint shit, hallelujah, hallelujah,  
oowow! oowow!  
must be the devil, going to heaven after i  
die, after we die  
everything going to be different, after we die  
we aint gon be  
hungry, ain gon be pain, ain gon be sufferin  
wont go thru this  
again, after we die, after we die owooo!  
owowoooo!  
after we die, its all gonna be good, have all  
the money we  
need after we die, have all the food we  
need after we die  
have a nice house like the rich folks, after  
we die, after we die, after we  
die, we can live like rev ike, after we die,  
hallelujah, hallelujah, must be  
the devil, it ain capitalism, it aint capitalism,

it aint capitalism,  
naw it aint that, jimmy carter wdnt lie,  
"lifes unfair" but it aint capitalism  
must be the devil, owow! it ain the police,  
jimmy carter wdnt lie, you  
know rosalynn wdnt not lillian, his  
drunken racist brother aint no reflection  
on jimmy, must be the devil got in im, i tell  
you, the devil killed malcolm  
and dr king too, even killed both kennedies,  
and pablo neruda and overthrew  
allende's govt. killed lumumba, and is  
negotiating with step and fetchit,  
sleep n eat and birmingham, over there in  
"Rhodesia", goin' under the name  
ian smith, must be the devil, caint be vortser,  
caint be apartheid, caint  
be imperialism, jimmy carter wdnt lie, didnt  
you hear him say in his state  
of the union message, i swear on rosalynn's  
face-lifted catatonia, i wdnt lie  
nixon lied, haldeman lied, dean lied, hoover  
lied hoover sucked (dicks) too  
but jimmy dont, jimmy wdnt jimmy aint lying,  
must be the devil, put yr  
money on the plate, must be the devil, in  
heaven we'all all be straight  
cain be rockefeller, he gave amos pootbootie a  
scholarship to Behavior  
Modification Univ, and Genevieve Almoswhite  
works for his foundation  
Must be niggers! Cain be Mellon, he gave  
Winky Suckass, a fellowship in  
his bank put him in charge of closing out  
mortgages in the lowlife  
Pittsburgh Hill nigger section, caint be him.  
(Goes on babbling, and wailing, jerking  
in pathocrazy grin stupor)  
Yessuh, yessuh, yessuh, yessuh, yessuh, yes-  
suh, yessuh, yessuh, yessuh, yessuh,



put yr money in the plate, dont be late, dont  
have to wait, you gonna be in  
heaven after you die, you gon get all you need  
once you gone, yessuh, i heard  
it on *the jeffersons*, i heard it on *the rookies*,  
I swallowed it  
whole on *roots*: wasn't it nice slavery was so  
cool and  
all you had to do was wear derbies and vests  
and train chickens and buy your  
way free if you had a mind to, must be the  
devil, wasnt no *white* folks,  
lazy niggers chained theyselves and threw  
they own black asses in the bottom  
of the boats, [(well now that you mention it King  
Assblackuwasi helped throw yr ass in  
the bottom of the boat, yo mamma, wife, and  
you never seed em no more)] must  
a been the devil, gimme your money put your  
money on this plate, heaven be here soon,  
just got to die, just got to stop living, close yr  
eyes stop  
breathin and bammm-O heaven be here, you  
have all a what you need, Bam-O  
all a sudden, heaven be here, you have all you  
need, that assembly line  
you work on will dissolve in thin air owowoo!  
owowoo! Just gotta die  
just gotta die, this ol world aint nuthin, must be  
the devil got you  
thinkin so, it cain be rockefeller, it cain be mor-  
gan, it caint be capitalism  
it caint be national oppression owow! No Way!  
Now go back to work and cool  
it, go back to work and lay back, just a little  
while longer till you pass  
its all gonna be alright once you gone. gimme  
that last bitta silver you got  
stashed there sister, gimme that dust now broth-  
er man, itll be ok on the

other side, yo soul be clean be washed pure  
white. yes. yes. yes. owow.  
now go back to work, go to sleep, yes, go to  
sleep, go back to work, yes  
owow. owow. uuuuuuuuuu, uuuuuuuuuu,  
uuuuuuuuuuu. yes, uuuuuuuu. yes.  
uuuuuuuuuuu.  
a men.

### **Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note**

BY AMIRI BARAKA, 1934-2014

for Kellie Jones, born 16 May 1959  
Lately, I've become accustomed to the way  
The ground opens up and envelopes me  
Each time I go out to walk the dog.  
Or the broad edged silly music the wind  
Makes when I run for a bus...

Things have come to that.

And now, each night I count the stars,  
And each night I get the same number.  
And when they will not come to be counted,  
I count the holes they leave.

Nobody sings anymore.

And then last night, I tiptoed up  
To my daughter's room and heard her  
Talking to someone, and when I opened  
The door, there was no one there...  
Only she on her knees, peeking into

Her own clasped hands.

Information on Amiri Baraka here: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/amiri-baraka>

### **O-Jazz-O War Memoir: Jazz, Don't Listen To It At Your Own Risk**

BOB KAUFMAN, 1925-1986

In the beginning, in the wet  
Warm dark place,  
Straining to break out, clawing at strange cables  
Hearing her screams, laughing  
*"Later we forgave ourselves, we didn't know"*  
Some secret jazz  
Shouted, *wait, don't go.*  
Impatient, we came running, innocent  
Laughing blobs of blood & faith.  
To this mother, father world  
Where laughter seems out of place  
So we learned to cry, pleased  
They pronounce human.  
The secret Jazz blew a sigh  
Some familiar sound shouted *wait*  
*Some are evil, some will hate.*  
*"Just Jazz, blowing its top again"*  
So we rushed & laughed.  
As we pushed & grabbed  
While jazz blew in the night  
Suddenly they were too busy to hear a simple sound  
They were busy shoving mud in men's mouths,  
Who were busy dying on the living ground  
Busy earning medals, for killing children on deserted street corners  
Occupying their fathers, raping their mothers, busy humans we  
Busy burning Japanese in atomicolorcinemascope  
With stereophonic screams,  
What one hundred per cent red blooded savage, would waste precious  
time  
Listening to jazz, with so many important things going on  
But even the fittest murderers must rest  
So they sat down in our blood soaked garments,

and listened to jazz  
    lost, steeped in all our death dreams  
They were shocked at the sound of life, long gone from our own  
They were indignant at the whistling, thinking, singing, beating,  
    swinging,  
They wept for it, hugged, kissed it, loved it, joined it, we drank it,  
Smoked it, ate with it, slept with it  
They made our girls wear it for lovemaking  
Instead of silly lace gowns,  
Now in those terrible moments, when the dark memories come  
The secret moments to which we admit no one  
When guiltily we crawl back in time, reaching away from ourselves  
They hear a familiar sound,  
Jazz, scratching, digging, blueing, swinging jazz,  
And listen,  
And feel, & die.

Information on Bob Kaufman here: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/bob-kaufman>

## **Sho**

Douglas Kearney, 1974

*A torchon after Indigo Weller*

Some need some Body  
or more to ape sweat  
on some site. Bloody

purl or dirty spit  
hocked up for to show  
who gets eaten. Rig

Body up. Bough bow  
to breeze a lazed jig  
and sway to grig's good

fiddling. Pine-deep  
dusk, a spot where stood  
Body. Thus they clap

—

when I mount *banc'*, jig  
up the lectern. Bow  
to say, "it's all good,"

we, gathered, withstood  
the bends of dives deep  
er, darker. They clap

as I get down. Sweat  
highlights my body,  
how meats dyed bloody

look fresher for show  
ing, I got deep, spit  
out my mouth, a rig

—

id red rind. Bloody  
melon. Ha! No sweat!  
Joking! Nobody

knows the trouble. Rig  
full o' Deus. "Sho  
gwine fix dis mess." Spit

in tragedy's good  
eye! "This one's called ..." Jig  
ger gogglers then bow

housefully. They clap.  
"... be misundeeerstooood!"  
Hang notes high or deep,

—

make my tongue a bow—  
what's the gift?! My good  
song vox? The gift?!?! Jig

gle nickels from deep  
down my craw. They clap.  
I'se so jolly! Stood

on that bank. Body  
picked over, blood E  
rato! Braxton's *sweat*

*y brow syndrome*®, spit  
out a sax bell ~~wring~~  
a negrocious show

—

of feels. Fa show, sweat  
equals work. Bloody  
inkpot of Body,

I stay nib dipped, show  
never run dry! Rig  
orously, I spit

out stressed feet. Lines jig!  
Ha ha ha ha!!!! Good  
one [that/I] is, bow

deep but not out. Stood,  
shining, dim. They clap,  
waves slapping hulls. *Deep*

—

don't mean *sunken*; *good's*  
not *yummy*, right?! Bow,

blanched with foam, jig-jigs.

“This one’s called ...” — they clap—  
“\_\_\_\_\_barrow.’ So much dep  
ends / upon / dead \_\_\_\_\_” Stood,

I on that bloody  
rise of sweet Body;  
there *you* is, too. Sweat

it, let’s. They clap—“Rig  
ht?” some ask, post. Spit  
tle-lipped: I said: “Sho.”

Douglas Kearney information here: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/douglas-kearney>

### **A Small Needful Fact**

Ross Gay, 1974

Is that Eric Garner worked  
for some time for the Parks and Rec.  
Horticultural Department, which means,  
perhaps, that with his very large hands,  
perhaps, in all likelihood,  
he put gently into the earth  
some plants which, most likely,  
some of them, in all likelihood,  
continue to grow, continue  
to do what such plants do, like house  
and feed small and necessary creatures,  
like being pleasant to touch and smell,  
like converting sunlight  
into food, like making it easier  
for us to breathe.

## To the Fig Tree on 9th and Christian

Ross Gay, 1974--

Tumbling through the  
city in my  
mind without once  
looking up  
the racket in  
the lugwork probably  
rehearsing some  
stupid thing I  
said or did  
some crime or  
other the city they  
say is a lonely  
place until yes  
the sound of sweeping  
and a woman  
yes with a  
broom beneath  
which you are now  
too the canopy  
of a fig its  
arms pulling the  
September sun to it  
and she  
has a hose too  
and so works hard  
rinsing and scrubbing  
the walk  
lest some poor sod  
slip on the  
silk of a fig  
and break his hip  
and not probably  
reach over to gobble up  
the perpetrator  
the light catches  
the veins in her hands



when I ask about  
the tree they  
flutter in the air and  
she says take  
as much as  
you can  
help me  
so I load my  
pockets and mouth  
and she points  
to the step-ladder against  
the wall to  
mean more but  
I was without a  
sack so my meager  
plunder would have to  
suffice and an old woman  
whom gravity  
was pulling into  
the earth loosed one  
from a low slung  
branch and its eye  
wept like hers  
which she dabbed  
with a kerchief as she  
cleaved the fig with  
what remained of her  
teeth and soon there were  
eight or nine  
people gathered beneath  
the tree looking into  
it like a  
constellation pointing  
do you see it  
and I am tall and so  
good for these things  
and a bald man even  
told me so  
when I grabbed three  
or four for

him reaching into the  
giddy throngs of  
yellow-jackets sugar  
stoned which he only  
pointed to smiling and  
rubbing his stomach  
I mean he was really rubbing his stomach  
like there was a baby  
in there  
it was hot his  
head shone while he  
offered recipes to the  
group using words which  
I couldn't understand and besides  
I was a little  
tipsy on the dance  
of the velvety heart rolling  
in my mouth  
pulling me down and  
down into the  
oldest countries of my  
body where I ate my first fig  
from the hand of a man who escaped his country  
by swimming through the night  
and maybe  
never said more than  
five words to me  
at once but gave me  
figs and a man on his way  
to work hops twice  
to reach at last his  
fig which he smiles at and calls  
*baby, c'mere baby,*  
he says and blows a kiss  
to the tree which everyone knows  
cannot grow this far north  
being Mediterranean  
and favoring the rocky, sun-baked soils  
of Jordan and Sicily  
but no one told the fig tree

or the immigrants  
there is a way  
the fig tree grows  
in groves it wants,  
it seems, to hold us,  
yes I am anthropomorphizing  
goddammit I have twice  
in the last thirty seconds  
rubbed my sweaty  
forearm into someone else's  
sweaty shoulder  
gleeful eating out of each other's hands  
on Christian St.  
in Philadelphia a city like most  
which has murdered its own  
people  
this is true  
we are feeding each other  
from a tree  
at the corner of Christian and 9th  
strangers maybe  
never again.

Information on Ross Gay can be found here:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ross-gay>

### **The Boy Died in My Alley**

by Gwendolyn Brooks, 1917-2000

*to Running Boy*

The Boy died in my alley  
without my Having Known.  
Policeman said, next morning,  
"Apparently died Alone."

"You heard a shot?" Policeman said.  
Shots I hear and Shots I hear.

I never see the Dead.

The Shot that killed him yes I heard  
as I heard the Thousand shots before;  
careening tinnily down the nights  
across my years and arteries.

Policeman pounded on my door.  
"Who is it?" "POLICE!" Policeman yelled.  
"A Boy was dying in your alley.  
A Boy is dead, and in your alley.  
And have you known this Boy before?"

I have known this Boy before.  
I have known this boy before, who ornaments my alley.  
I never saw his face at all.  
I never saw his futurefall.  
But I have known this Boy.

I have always heard him deal with death.  
I have always heard the shout, the volley.  
I have closed my heart-ears late and early.  
And I have killed him ever.

I joined the Wild and killed him  
with knowledgeable unknowing.  
I saw where he was going.  
I saw him Crossed. And seeing,  
I did not take him down.

He cried not only "Father!"  
but "Mother!  
Sister!  
Brother."  
The cry climbed up the alley.  
It went up to the wind.  
It hung upon the heaven  
for a long  
stretch-strain of Moment.

The red floor of my alley  
is a special speech to me.

### **The Lovers of the Poor**

GWENDOLYN BROOKS, 1917-2000

arrive. The Ladies from the Ladies' Betterment League  
Arrive in the afternoon, the late light slanting  
In diluted gold bars across the boulevard brag  
Of proud, seamed faces with mercy and murder hinting  
Here, there, interrupting, all deep and debonair,  
The pink paint on the innocence of fear;  
Walk in a gingerly manner up the hall.  
Cutting with knives served by their softest care,  
Served by their love, so barbarously fair.  
Whose mothers taught: You'd better not be cruel!  
You had better not throw stones upon the wrens!  
Herein they kiss and coddle and assault  
Anew and dearly in the innocence  
With which they baffle nature. Who are full,  
Sleek, tender-clad, fit, fiftyish, a-glow, all  
Sweetly abortive, hinting at fat fruit,  
Judge it high time that fiftyish fingers felt  
Beneath the lovelier planes of enterprise.  
To resurrect. To moisten with milky chill.  
To be a random hitching-post or plush.  
To be, for wet eyes, random and handy hem.

    Their guild is giving money to the poor.

The worthy poor. The very very worthy  
And beautiful poor. Perhaps just not too swarthy?  
perhaps just not too dirty nor too dim  
Nor—passionate. In truth, what they could wish  
Is—something less than derelict or dull.  
Not staunch enough to stab, though, gaze for gaze!  
God shield them sharply from the beggar-bold!  
The noxious needy ones whose battle's bald  
Nonetheless for being voiceless, hits one down.

    But it's all so bad! and entirely too much for them.

The stench; the urine, cabbage, and dead beans,  
Dead porridges of assorted dusty grains,  
The old smoke, *heavy* diapers, and, they're told,  
Something called chitterlings. The darkness. Drawn  
Darkness, or dirty light. The soil that stirs.  
The soil that looks the soil of centuries.  
And for that matter the *general* oldness. Old  
Wood. Old marble. Old tile. Old old old.  
Not homekind Oldness! Not Lake Forest, Glencoe.  
Nothing is sturdy, nothing is majestic,  
There is no quiet drama, no rubbed glaze, no  
Unkillable infirmity of such  
A tasteful turn as lately they have left,  
Glencoe, Lake Forest, and to which their cars  
Must presently restore them. When they're done  
With dullards and distortions of this fistic  
Patience of the poor and put-upon.

They've never seen such a make-do-ness as  
Newspaper rugs before! In this, this "flat,"  
Their hostess is gathering up the oozed, the rich  
Rugs of the morning (tattered! the bespattered. . . .)  
Readies to spread clean rugs for afternoon.  
Here is a scene for you. The Ladies look,  
In horror, behind a substantial citizeness  
Whose trains clank out across her swollen heart.  
Who, arms akimbo, almost fills a door.  
All tumbling children, quilts dragged to the floor  
And tortured thereover, potato peelings, soft-  
Eyed kitten, hunched-up, haggard, to-be-hurt.

Their League is allotting largesse to the Lost.  
But to put their clean, their pretty money, to put  
Their money collected from delicate rose-fingers  
Tipped with their hundred flawless rose-nails seems . . .

They own Spode, Lowestoft, candelabra,  
Mantels, and hostess gowns, and sunburst clocks,  
Turtle soup, Chippendale, red satin "hangings,"  
Aubussons and Hattie Carnegie. They Winter  
In Palm Beach; cross the Water in June; attend,  
When suitable, the nice Art Institute;  
Buy the right books in the best bindings; saunter

On Michigan, Easter mornings, in sun or wind.  
Oh Squalor! This sick four-story hulk, this fibre  
With fissures everywhere! Why, what are bringings  
Of loathe-love largesse? What shall peril hungers  
So old old, what shall flatter the desolate?  
Tin can, blocked fire escape and chitterling  
And swaggering seeking youth and the puzzled wreckage  
Of the middle passage, and urine and stale shames  
And, again, the porridges of the underslung  
And children children children. Heavens! That  
Was a rat, surely, off there, in the shadows? Long  
And long-tailed? Gray? The Ladies from the Ladies'  
Betterment League agree it will be better  
To achieve the outer air that rights and steadies,  
To hie to a house that does not holler, to ring  
Bells elsetime, better presently to cater  
To no more Possibilities, to get  
Away. Perhaps the money can be posted.  
Perhaps they two may choose another Slum!  
Some serious sooty half-unhappy home! —  
Where loathe-love likelier may be invested.

Keeping their scented bodies in the center  
Of the hall as they walk down the hysterical hall,  
They allow their lovely skirts to graze no wall,  
Are off at what they manage of a canter,  
And, resuming all the clues of what they were,  
Try to avoid inhaling the laden air.

### **The Near-Johannesburg Boy**

Gwendolyn Brooks, 1917-2000

My way is from woe to wonder.  
A black boy near Johannesburg, hot  
in the Hot Time.

Those people  
do not like Black among the colors.  
They do not like our  
calling our country ours.

They say our country is not ours.  
Those people.  
Visiting the world as I visit the world.  
Those people.  
Their bleach is puckered and cruel.

It is work  
to speak of my Father.  
My Father.  
His body whole till they stopped it.  
Suddenly. With a short shot.

Before, before that,  
physically tall among us,  
he died every day.  
Every moment. Mt Father...

First was the crumpling.  
No. First was the Fist-and-the-Fury.  
Last was the crumpling.  
It is a little used rag  
that is under, it is not,  
it is not my Father gone down.

About my Mother.  
My Mother  
was this loud laughter  
below the sunshine, below the starlight at festival.  
My Mother is still this loud laughter!  
Still moving straight  
in the Getting-It-Done (as she names it.)  
oh a strong eye is my Mother.  
Except when it seems we are lax in our looking.

Well, enough of slump, enough of Old Story.  
Like a clean spear of fire I am moving.  
I am not still.  
I am ready to be ready.  
I shall flail in the Hot Time.



Tonight I walk with  
a hundred of playmates to where  
the hurt Black of our skin is forbidden.  
There, in the dark that is our dark, there,  
a-pulse across earth that is our earth, there,  
there exulting, there Exactly, there redeeming,  
there Roaring Up  
(oh my Father)  
we shall forge with the fist-and-the-Fury:  
we shall flail in the Hot Time:  
we shall  
we shall

### **We Real Cool**

Gwendolyn Brooks, 1917-2000

The Pool Players.

Seven at the Golden Shovel.

We real cool. We  
Left school. We

Lurk late. We  
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We  
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We  
Die soon.

Information about Gwendolyn Brooks can be found here:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/gwendolyn-brooks>

### **Requiem for a Nest**

WANDA COLEMAN, 1946-2013

the winged thang built her dream palace

amid the fine green eyes of a sheltering bough  
she did not know it was urban turf  
disguised as serenely delusionally rural  
nor did she know the neighborhood was rife  
with slant-mawed felines and those long-taloned  
swoopers of prey. she was ignorant of the acidity & oil  
that slowly polluted the earth, and was never  
to detect the serpent coiled one strong limb below

following her nature she flitted and dove  
for whatever blades twigs and mud  
could be found under the humming blue  
and created a hatchery for her spawn  
not knowing all were doomed

### American Sonnet (10)

Wanda Coleman, 1946-2013

*after Lowell*

our mothers wrung hell and hardtack from row  
and boll. fenced others'  
gardens with bones of lovers. embarking  
from Africa in chains  
reluctant pilgrims stolen by Jehovah's light  
planted here the bitter  
seed of blight and here eternal torches mark  
the shame of Moloch's mansions  
built in slavery's name. our hungered eyes  
do see/refuse the dark  
illuminate the blood-soaked steps of each  
historic gain. a yearning  
yearning to avenge the raping of the womb  
from which we spring

Information on Wanda Coleman can be found here: <https://poets.org/poet/wanda-coleman>

## **The Golden Shovel**

*Terrance Hayes, 1971*

*after Gwendolyn Brooks*

I. 1981

When I am so small Da's sock covers my arm, we  
cruise at twilight until we find the place the real

men lean, bloodshot and translucent with cool.  
His smile is a gold-plated incantation as we

drift by women on bar stools, with nothing left  
in them but approachlessness. This is a school

I do not know yet. But the cue sticks mean we  
are rubbed by light, smooth as wood, the lurk

of smoke thinned to song. We won't be out late.  
Standing in the middle of the street last night we

watched the moonlit lawns and a neighbor strike  
his son in the face. A shadow knocked straight

Da promised to leave me everything: the shovel we  
used to bury the dog, the words he loved to sing

his rusted pistol, his squeaky Bible, his sin.  
The boy's sneakers were light on the road. We

watched him run to us looking wounded and thin.  
He'd been caught lying or drinking his father's gin.

He'd been defending his ma, trying to be a man. We  
stood in the road, and my father talked about jazz,

how sometimes a tune is born of outrage. By June  
the boy would be locked upstate. That night we

got down on our knees in my room. *If I should die  
before I wake.* Da said to me, *it will be too soon.*

## II. 1991

Into the tented city we go, we-  
akened by the fire's ethereal

afterglow. Born lost and cool-  
er than heartache. What we

know is what we know. The left  
hand severed and school-

ed by cleverness. A plate of we-  
ekdays cooking. The hour lurk-

ing in the afterglow. A late-  
night chant. Into the city we

go. Close your eyes and strike  
a blow. Light can be straight-

ened by its shadow. What we  
break is what we hold. A sing-

ular blue note. An outcry sin-  
ged exiting the throat. We

push until we thin, thin-  
king we won't creep back again.

While God licks his kin, we  
sing until our blood is jazz,

we swing from June to June.  
We sweat to keep from we-

eping. Groomed on a diet  
of hunger, we end too soon.

**American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin [Even the most kindhearted white woman]**

Terrance Hayes, 1971--

Even the most kindhearted white woman,  
Dragging herself through traffic with her nails  
On the wheel & her head in a chamber of black  
Modern American music may begin, almost  
Carelessly, to breathe *n*-words. Yes, even the most  
Besppectacled hallucination cruising the lanes  
Of America may find her tongue curls inward,  
Entangling her windpipe, her vents, toes & pedals  
When she drives alone. Even the most made up  
Layers of persona in a two- or four-door vehicle  
Sealed in a fountain of bass & black boys  
Chanting *n*-words may begin to chant inwardly  
Softly before she can catch herself. Of course,  
After that, what is inward, is absorbed.

Information on Terrance Hayes can be found here: <https://poets.org/poet/terrance-hayes>

**Love in the Weather's Bells**

JAY WRIGHT, 1934—

Snow hurries  
the strawberries  
from the bush.  
Star-wet water rides  
you into summer,  
into my autumn.  
Your cactus hands  
are at my heart again.  
Lady, I court  
my dream of you

in lilies and in rain.  
I vest myself  
in your oldest memory  
and in my oldest need.  
And in my passion  
you are the deepest blue  
of the oldest rose.  
Star circle me an axe.  
I cannot cut myself  
from any of your emblems.  
It will soon be cold here,  
and dark here;  
the grass will lie flat  
to search for its spring head.  
I will bow again  
in the winter of your eyes.  
If there is music,  
it will be the weather's bells  
to call me to the abandoned chapel  
of your simple body.

### **The Healing Improvisation of Hair**

Jay Wright, 1934--

If you undo your do you wóuld  
be strange. Hair has been on my mind.  
I used to lean in the doorway  
and watch my stony woman wind  
the copper through the black, and play  
with my understanding, show me she cóuld  
take a cup of river water,  
and watch it shimmy, watch it change,  
turn around and become ash bone.  
Wind in the cottonwoods wakes me  
to a day so thin its breastbone  
shows, so paid out it shakes me free  
of its blue dust. I will arrange

that river water, bottom juice.  
I conjure my head in the stream  
and ride with the silk feel of it  
as my woman bathes me, and shaves  
away the scorn, sponges the grit  
of solitude from my skin, laves  
the salt water of self-esteem  
over my feathering body.  
How like joy to come upon me  
in remembering a head of hair  
and the way water would caress  
it, and stress beauty in the flair  
and cut of the only witness  
to my dance under sorrow's tree.  
This swift darkness is spring's first hour.

I carried my life, like a stone,  
in a ragged pocket, but I  
had a true weaving song, a sly  
way with rhythm, a healing tone.

**Information about Jay Wright here:** <https://poets.org/poet/jay-wright>

### **You, Therefore**

BY REGINALD SHEPHERD, 1963-2008

*For Robert Philen*

You are like me, you will die too, but not today:  
you, incommensurate, therefore the hours shine:  
if I say to you "To you I say," you have not been  
set to music, or broadcast live on the ghost  
radio, may never be an oil painting or  
Old Master's charcoal sketch: you are  
a concordance of person, number, voice,  
and place, strawberries spread through your name  
as if it were budding shrubs, how you remind me  
of some spring, the waters as cool and clear  
(late rain clings to your leaves, shaken by light wind),

which is where you occur in grassy moonlight:  
and you are a lily, an aster, white trillium  
or viburnum, by all rights mine, white star  
in the meadow sky, the snow still arriving  
from its earthwards journeys, here where there is  
no snow (I dreamed the snow was you,  
when there was snow), you are my right,  
have come to be my night (your body takes on  
the dimensions of sleep, the shape of sleep  
becomes you): and you fall from the sky  
with several flowers, words spill from your mouth  
in waves, your lips taste like the sea, salt-sweet (trees  
and seas have flown away, I call it  
loving you): home is nowhere, therefore you,  
a kind of dwell and welcome, song after all,  
and free of any eden we can name

Information about Reginald Shepherd here:  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/reginald-shepherd>

### **Declaration**

TRACY K. SMITH, 1972--

*He has*

*sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people*

*He has plundered our—*

*ravaged our—*

*destroyed the lives of our—*

*taking away our—*

*abolishing our most valuable—*

*and altering fundamentally the Forms of our—*



*In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for*

*Redress in the most humble terms:*

*Our repeated  
Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury.*

*We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration  
and settlement here.*

*—taken Captive*

*on the high Seas*

*to bear —*

## **Wade in the Water**

*for the Geechee Gullah Ring Shouters*

Tracy K. Smith, 1972--

One of the women greeted me.  
I love you, she said. She didn't  
Know me, but I believed her,  
And a terrible new ache  
Rolled over in my chest,  
Like in a room where the drapes  
Have been swept back. I love you,  
I love you, as she continued  
Down the hall past other strangers,  
Each feeling pierced suddenly  
By pillars of heavy light.  
I love you, throughout  
The performance, in every  
Handclap, every stomp.  
I love you in the rusted iron

Chains someone was made  
To drag until love let them be  
Unclasped and left empty  
In the center of the ring.  
I love you in the water  
Where they pretended to wade,  
Singing that old blood-deep song  
That dragged us to those banks  
And cast us in. I love you,  
The angles of it scraping at  
Each throat, shouldering past  
The swirling dust motes  
In those beams of light  
That whatever we now knew  
We could let ourselves feel, knew  
To climb. O Woods—O Dogs—  
O Tree—O Gun—O *Girl, run*—  
O Miraculous Many Gone—  
O Lord—O Lord—O Lord—  
Is this love the trouble you promised?

Information on Tracy K. Smith can be found here:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/tracy-k-smith#tab-poems>

## **Reward**

KEVIN YOUNG, 1970--

RUN AWAY from this sub-  
scriber for the second time  
are TWO NEGROES, viz. SMART,  
an outlandish dark fellow

with his country marks  
on his temples and bearing  
the remarkable brand of my  
name on his left breast, last

seen wearing an old ragged  
negro cloth shirt and breeches  
made of fearnought; also DIDO,  
a likely young wench of a yellow

cast, born in cherrytime in this  
parish, wearing a mixed coloured  
coat with a bundle of clothes,  
mostly blue, under her one good

arm. Both speak tolerable plain  
English and may insist on being  
called Cuffee and Khasa respect-  
ively. Whoever shall deliver

the said goods to the gaoler  
in Baton Rouge, or to the Sugar  
House in the parish, shall receive  
all reasonable charges plus

a genteel reward besides what  
the law allows. In the mean  
time all persons are strictly  
forbid harbouring them, on pain

of being prosecuted to the utmost  
rigour of the law. Ten guineas  
will be paid to anyone who can  
give intelligence of their being

harboured, employed, or enter-  
tained by a white person upon  
his sentence; five on conviction  
of a black. All Masters of vessels

are warned against carrying them  
out of state, as they may claim  
to be free. If any of the above  
Negroes return of their own

accord, they may still be forgiven by

ELIZABETH YOUNG.

Information on Kevin Young here:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49769/reward>

**let's face it** by Tyehimba Jess, 1965--

i'm parole on parade  
wanted poster on a short leash,  
biding time beneath the law  
of a master i chose myself.  
that faded rucksack of yassuh  
growing one load heavier  
with each slow grin  
stitched across my lips

i'm an ex-cons keeper,  
something I can't much forget  
in this prison choked country  
i cannot absolve this man of  
his greatest crime—the crime of race—  
binding us all to blood,  
cutting through skin,  
burning through history.

---

### **Blind Boone's Vision**

BY TYEHIMBA JESS, 1965—

When I got old enough  
I asked my mother,  
to her surprise,  
to tell me what she did  
with my eyes. She balked  
and stalled, sounding  
unsure for the first time  
I could remember.  
It was the tender way  
she held my face  
and kissed where tears  
should have rolled  
that told me I'd asked  
of her the almost impossible—  
to recount my blinding  
tale, to tell what became

of the rest of me.  
She took me by the hand  
and led me to a small  
sapling that stood not  
much taller than me.  
I could smell the green  
marrow of its promise  
reaching free of the soil  
like a song from Earth's  
royal, dirty mouth.  
Then Mother told me  
how she, newly freed,  
had prayed like a slave  
through the night when  
the surgeon took my eyes  
to save my fevered life,  
then got off her knees  
come morning to take  
the severed parts of me  
for burial—right there  
beneath that small tree.  
They fed the roots,  
climbed through its leaves  
to soak in sunlight . . .  
and so, she told me,  
I *can* see.

When the wind rustles  
up and cools me down,  
when the earth shakes  
with footsteps and when  
the sound of birdcalls  
stirs forests like the black  
and white bustling  
'neath my fingertips  
I am of the light and shade  
of my tree. Now,  
ask me how tall  
that tree of mine  
has grown to be

after all this time—  
it touches a place  
between heaven and here.  
And I shudder when I hear  
the earth's wind  
in my bones  
through the bones  
of that boxed-up  
swarm of wood,  
bird and bee:  
I let it loose . . .  
and beyond  
me.

Information on Tyehimba Jess here: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/tyehimba-jess>

### **How I Discovered Poetry**

MARILYN NELSON, 1946--

It was like soul-kissing, the way the words  
filled my mouth as Mrs. Purdy read from her desk.  
All the other kids zoned an hour ahead to 3:15,  
but Mrs. Purdy and I wandered lonely as clouds borne  
by a breeze off Mount Parnassus. She must have seen  
the darkest eyes in the room brim: The next day  
she gave me a poem she'd chosen especially for me  
to read to the all except for me white class.  
She smiled when she told me to read it, smiled harder,  
said oh yes I could. She smiled harder and harder  
until I stood and opened my mouth to banjo playing  
darkies, pickaninnies, disses and dats. When I finished  
my classmates stared at the floor. We walked silent  
to the buses, awed by the power of words.

### **Thompson and Seaman Vows, African Union Church**

Marilyn Nelson, 1946--

(ca. 1847)

Miss Charlotte Thompson, daughter of Ada  
Thompson of Seneca and the late John,  
and Timothy James Seaman, son  
of the late Nancy Seaman, on Sunday.  
Reverend Rush performed the ceremony.  
The bride (twenty-four) was educated  
by a literate friend, and by seeing  
the African Theatre Company's  
productions of *Macbeth* and *Richard III*.  
She teaches in Colored School #3.  
Her father was a slave. Her mother, freed  
by a clause in her late mistress's will,  
sews and sells exquisite lace lingerie.  
The bridegroom (twenty-six) cannot read or write,  
but ciphers and is a skilled carpenter.  
His mother was slaved to an early death.  
She told him he was descended from kings.

### **The Continental Army**

Marilyn Nelson, 1946--

*George Washington passes through Lyme, CT 10 April 1776*

As I lifted the kettle from the hob,  
I heard the sound of drums from far away.  
I paused a moment. Then that hot water  
got heavy. But I listened while I worked:  
a steady rhythm, now and then a fife.  
I washed, wiped and put the dishes away,  
then dried my hands and hung up the dishrag.  
Now I heard hoof beats and many men's boots.  
I took my shawl and stepped into the dusk.

Out front, a white man with golden shoulders  
and a sandy pigtail sat a gray horse

as if they were one being longing to prance.  
Most of the town was lined along the street  
clapping and cheering. A white army marched,  
black booted feet in perfect unison,  
toward the church, in identical cocked hats,  
white sashes, blue coats with silver buttons,  
fawn weskits and breeches, and knee high boots.  
They carried muskets fitted with bayonets.  
Never had I seen such terrible power.

They marched to the cadence the drummer set,  
left right left right left right, for many ranks.  
Some of us gathered behind McCurdy's house  
whispering what we had heard and understood  
of all this commotion. Zacheus swore  
he saw some brothers among the soldiers.  
The drummer they marched to brought up the rear.  
We stood silenced when we saw his dark face.

Information about Marilyn Nelson here: <https://poets.org/poet/marilyn-nelson>

### **Botanical Fanaticism**

BY THYLIAS MOSS, 1954 —

My ancestors weren't hippies, cotton  
precluded fascination with flowers.  
I don't remember communes, I remember  
ghettos. The riots were real, not  
products of hallucinogens. Free love had  
been at Redbones since black unemployment  
and credit saturation.

The white women my mother cleaned  
for didn't notice she had changed. I guess  
it was a small event, a resurrected African  
jumping out the gap in her front teeth. I  
guess it looked like a cockroach; that's  
what she was supposed to have, not dignity.

My mother just couldn't get excited



about the Beatles, those mops she swilled  
in ammonia everyday on their heads. Besides,  
she didn't work like a dog but like a woman;  
they aren't the same. The hair was growing long  
for the same reasons Pinocchio's nose did.

I can think only of a lesbian draping  
crepe paper chains over my head to make a  
black Rapunzel possible; that's how a white  
woman tried to lift my burdens. At the time  
I didn't reject her for being lesbian or  
white but for both burdens. That was when  
I didn't want Ivory soap to be what  
cleaned me, made me presentable to society.  
All the suds I'd seen were white, they still  
are but who cares? I'm more interested in  
how soap dwindles in my hand, under the faucet.

I'm old enough to remember blocks  
of ice, old enough or poor enough.  
I remember chipping away at it, broken  
glass all over the floor. Later in the  
riots, the broken glass of looting tattled  
how desperate people were to keep cool.

There are roses now in my mother's yard.  
Sometimes she cuts them, sets them in Pepsi  
bottles throughout her rooms. She is,  
I admit, being sentimental. Looting her  
heart. My father who planted them is gone.  
That mop in the corner  
is his cane growing roots.

### **Interpretation of a Poem by Frost**

BY THYLIAS MOSS, 1954--

A young black girl stopped by the woods,  
so young she knew only one man: Jim Crow  
but she wasn't allowed to call him Mister.  
The woods were his and she respected his boundaries

even in the absence of fence.

Of course she delighted in the filling up  
of his woods, she so accustomed to emptiness,  
to being taken at face value.

This face, her face eternally the brown  
of declining autumn, watches snow inter the grass,  
cling to bark making it seem indecisive  
about race preference, a fast-to-melt idealism.

With the grass covered, black and white are the only options,  
polarity is the only reality; corners aren't neutral  
but are on edge.

She shakes off snow, defiance wasted  
on the limited audience of horse.

The snow does not hypnotize her as it wants to,  
as the blond sun does in making too many prefer daylight.

She has promises to keep,  
the promise that she bear Jim no bastards,  
the promise that she ride the horse only as long  
as it is willing to accept riders,  
the promise that she bear Jim no bastards,  
the promise to her face that it not be mistaken as shadow,  
and miles to go, more than the distance from Africa to Andover,  
more than the distance from black to white  
before she sleeps with Jim.

Information about Thylia Moss here: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/thylia-moss>  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/thylia-moss>

### **To Madame Curie**

BY ALICE MOORE DUNBAR-NELSON, 1875-1935

Oft have I thrilled at deeds of high emprise,  
And yearned to venture into realms unknown,  
Thrice blessed she, I deemed, whom God had shown  
How to achieve great deeds in woman's guise.  
Yet what discov'ry by expectant eyes  
Of foreign shores, could vision half the throne  
Full gained by her, whose power fully grown  
Exceeds the conquerors of th' uncharted skies?

So would I be this woman whom the world  
Avows its benefactor; nobler far,  
Than Sybil, Joan, Sappho, or Egypt's queen.  
In the alembic forged her shafts and hurled  
At pain, diseases, waging a humane war;  
Greater than this achievement, none, I ween.

**To the Negro Farmers of the United States**

BY ALICE MOORE DUNBAR-NELSON, 1875-1935

God washes clean the souls and hearts of you,  
His favored ones, whose backs bend o'er the soil,  
Which grudging gives to them requite for toil  
In sober graces and in vision true.  
God places in your hands the pow'r to do  
A service sweet. Your gift supreme to foil  
The bare-fanged wolves of hunger in the moil  
Of Life's activities. Yet all too few  
Your glorious band, clean sprung from Nature's heart;  
The hope of hungry thousands, in whose breast  
Dwells fear that you should fail. God placed no dart  
Of war within your hands, but pow'r to start  
Tears, praise, love, joy, enwoven in a crest  
To crown you glorious, brave ones of the soil.

Information about Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson here:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/alice-moore-dunbar-nelson>

**The Great Palaces of Versailles**

RITA DOVE, 1952--

*Nothing nastier than a white person!*  
She mutters as she irons alterations  
in the backroom of Charlotte's Dress Shoppe.  
The steam rising from a cranberry wool  
comes alive with perspiration  
and stale Evening of Paris.  
*Swamp she born from, swamp*  
*she swallow, swamp she got to sink again.*

The iron shoves gently  
into a gusset, waits until  
the puckers bloom away. Beyond  
the curtain, the white girls are all  
wearing shoulder pads to make their faces  
delicate. That laugh would be Autumn,  
tossing her hair in imitation of Bacall.

Beulah had read in the library  
how French ladies at court would tuck  
their fans in a sleeve  
and walk in the gardens for air. Swaying  
among lilies, lifting shy layers of silk,  
they dropped excrement as daintily  
as handkerchieves. Against all rules

she had saved the lining from a botched coat  
to face last year's gray skirt. She knows  
whenever she lifts a knee  
she flashes crimson. That seems legitimate;  
but in the book she had read  
how the *cavaliere* amused themselves  
wearing powder and perfume and spraying  
yellow borders knee-high on the stucco  
of the *Orangerie*.

A hanger clatters  
in the front of the shoppe.  
Beulah remembers how  
even Autumn could lean into a settee  
with her ankles crossed, sighing  
*I need a man who'll protect me*  
while smoking her cigarette down to the very end.

## DAYSTAR

RITA DOVE, 1952

She wanted a little room for thinking;  
but she saw diapers steaming on the line,

a doll slumped behind the door.

So she lugged a chair behind the garage  
to sit out the children's naps.

Sometimes there were things to watch –  
the pinched armor of a vanished cricket,  
a floating maple leaf. Other days  
she stared until she was assured  
when she closed her eyes  
she'd see only her own vivid blood.

She had an hour, at best, before Liza appeared  
pouting from the top of the stairs.  
And just *what* was mother doing  
out back with the field mice? Why,

building a palace. Later  
that night when Thomas rolled over and  
lurched into her, she would open her eyes  
and think of the place that was hers  
for an hour – where  
she was nothing,  
pure nothing, in the middle of the day.

### Flash Cards

Rita Dove, 1952--

In math I was the whiz kid, keeper  
of oranges and apples. *What you don't understand,*  
*master,* my father said; the faster  
I answered, the faster they came.

I could see one bud on the teacher's geranium,  
one clear bee sputtering at the wet pane.  
The tulip trees always dragged after heavy rain  
so I tucked my head as my boots slapped home.

My father put up his feet after work

and relaxed with a highball and *The Life of Lincoln*.  
After supper we drilled and I climbed the dark

before sleep, before a thin voice hissed  
numbers as I spun on a wheel. I had to guess.  
*Ten*, I kept saying, *I'm only ten*.

Information about Rita Dove can be found here:  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/rita-dove>

### **The Mothers**

BY ROBIN COSTE LEWIS, 1964--

We meet—sometimes—between the dry hours,  
Between clefts in the involuntary plan,  
Refusing to think of *rent* or *food*—how  
Civic the slick to *satisfied* from *man*.

And Democratic. A Lucky Strike each, we  
Sponge each other off, while what's greyed  
In and grey slinks ashamed down the drain.  
No need to articulate great restraint,

No need to see each other's mouth lip  
The obvious. *Giddy*. Fingers garnished  
With fumes of onions and garlic, I slip  
Back into my shift, then watch her hands—wordless—

Reattach her stockings to the martyred  
Rubber moons wavering at her garter.

Information on Robin Coste Lewis here:  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robin-coste-lewis>

## Letter

Langston Hughes, 1902-1967

*Dear Mama,*

*Time I pay rent and get my food  
and laundry I don't have much left  
but here is five dollars for you  
to show you I still appreciate you.  
My girl-friend send her love and say  
she hopes to lay eyes on you sometime in life.  
Mama, it has been raining cats and dogs up  
here. Well, that is all so I will close.*

*Your son baby*

*Respectably as ever,*

*Joe*

## Let America Be America Again

LANGSTON HUGHES, 1902-1967

Let America be America again.  
Let it be the dream it used to be.  
Let it be the pioneer on the plain  
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—  
Let it be that great strong land of love  
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme  
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty  
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,  
But opportunity is real, and life is free,  
Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,  
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

*Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?  
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?*

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,  
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.  
I am the red man driven from the land,  
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek —  
And finding only the same old stupid plan  
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,  
Tangled in that ancient endless chain  
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!  
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!  
Of work the men! Of take the pay!  
Of owning everything for one's own greed!

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.  
I am the worker sold to the machine.  
I am the Negro, servant to you all.  
I am the people, humble, hungry, mean —  
Hungry yet today despite the dream.  
Beaten yet today — O, Pioneers!  
I am the man who never got ahead,  
The poorest worker bartered through the years.

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream  
In the Old World while still a serf of kings,  
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,  
That even yet its mighty daring sings  
In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned  
That's made America the land it has become.  
O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas  
In search of what I meant to be my home —  
For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,  
And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,  
And torn from Black Africa's strand I came



To build a "homeland of the free."

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?  
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?  
The millions shot down when we strike?  
The millions who have nothing for our pay?  
For all the dreams we've dreamed  
And all the songs we've sung  
And all the hopes we've held  
And all the flags we've hung,  
The millions who have nothing for our pay—  
Except the dream that's almost dead today.

O, let America be America again—  
The land that never has been yet—  
And yet must be—the land where *every* man is free.  
The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME—  
Who made America,  
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,  
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,  
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose—  
The steel of freedom does not stain.  
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,  
We must take back our land again,  
America!

O, yes,  
I say it plain,  
America never was America to me,  
And yet I swear this oath—  
America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,  
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,  
We, the people, must redeem  
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.

The mountains and the endless plain—  
All, all the stretch of these great green states—  
And make America again!

### **Johannesburg Mines**

Langston Hughes, 1902-1967

In the Johannesburg mines  
There are 240,000  
Native Africans working.  
What kind of poem  
Would you  
Make out of that?  
240,000 natives  
Working in the  
Johannesburg mines.

Information on Langston Hughes biography here:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/langston-hughes>

### **Enlightenment**

NATASHA TRETHERWAY, 1966-

In the portrait of Jefferson that hangs  
at Monticello, he is rendered two-toned:  
his forehead white with illumination —

a lit bulb — the rest of his face in shadow,  
darkened as if the artist meant to contrast  
his bright knowledge, its dark subtext.

By 1805, when Jefferson sat for the portrait,  
he was already linked to an affair  
with his slave. Against a backdrop, blue

and ethereal, a wash of paint that seems  
to hold him in relief, Jefferson gazes out  
across the centuries, his lips fixed as if

he's just uttered some final word.

The first time I saw the painting, I listened  
as my father explained the contradictions:

how Jefferson hated slavery, though — *out  
of necessity*, my father said — had to own  
slaves; that his moral philosophy meant

he could not have fathered those children:  
*would have been impossible*, my father said.  
For years we debated the distance between

word and deed. I'd follow my father from book  
to book, gathering citations, listening  
as he named — like a field guide to Virginia —

each flower and tree and bird as if to prove  
a man's pursuit of knowledge is greater  
than his shortcomings, the limits of his vision.

I did not know then the subtext  
of our story, that my father could imagine  
Jefferson's words made flesh in my flesh —

*the improvement of the blacks in body  
and mind, in the first instance of their mixture  
with the whites* — or that my father could believe

he'd made me *better*. When I think of this now,  
I see how the past holds us captive,  
its beautiful ruin etched on the mind's eye:

my young father, a rough outline of the old man  
he's become, needing to show me  
the better measure of his heart, an equation

writ large at Monticello. That was years ago.  
Now, we take in how much has changed:  
talk of Sally Hemings, someone asking,

*How white was she?* — parsing the fractions  
as if to name what made her worthy  
of Jefferson's attentions: a near-white,

quadroon mistress, not a plain black slave.

*Imagine stepping back into the past,*  
our guide tells us then — and I can't resist

whispering to my father: *This is where*  
*we split up. I'll head around to the back.*  
When he laughs, I know he's grateful

I've made a joke of it, this history  
that links us — white father, black daughter —  
even as it renders us other to each other.

### **Kitchen Maid with Supper at Emmaus, or The Mulata**

Natasha Tretheway, 1966--

—after the painting by Diego Velázquez, ca. 1619

She is the vessels on the table before her:  
the copper pot tipped toward us, the white pitcher  
clutched in her hand, the black one edged in red  
and upside down. Bent over, she is the mortar  
and the pestle at rest in the mortar — still angled  
in its posture of use. She is the stack of bowls  
and the bulb of garlic beside it, the basket hung  
by a nail on the wall and the white cloth bundled  
in it, the rag in the foreground recalling her hand.  
She's the stain on the wall the size of her shadow —  
the color of blood, the shape of a thumb. She is echo  
of Jesus at table, framed in the scene behind her:  
his white corona, her white cap. Listening, she leans  
into what she knows. Light falls on half her face.

Information about Natasha Trethewey can be found here:  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/natasha-trethewey>

## clare's song

Evie Shockley, 1965--

blonde fair bleached faded pale pastel light  
blameless clean innocent guiltless pure clear  
anatomy build figure person physique form  
complexion countenance hue mien tint cast  
bead dab dash ounce iota spot trace drop  
succeed qualify answer do suffice suit pass

authorization permit ticket license paper visa pass  
effortless facile moderate smooth undemanding light  
abandon dismiss disown quit reject renounce drop  
jump leap hurdle negotiate surmount vault clear  
actors artists characters company players roles cast  
behavior manner conduct custom practice rite form

arrange assemble concoct create devise forge form  
cross depart flow go move proceed travel pass  
copy duplicate facsimile mold plaster replica cast  
amusing gay merry blithe pleasing witty light  
accumulate gain acquire net realize secure clear  
decrease decline downturn reduction slump drop

bleed dribble leak ooze seep splash trickle drop  
character class grade make species variety form  
audible lucid coherent distinct plain precise clear  
canyon cut gap gorge path opening ravine pass  
airy buoyant delicate feathery unsubstantial light  
emit radiate diffuse spray spread scatter cast

appoint assign designate choose name pick cast  
abyss chasm descent dip plunge precipice drop  
angle approach aspect attitude slant viewpoint light  
application sheet chart questionnaire blank form

advance overture proposition approach play pass  
absolute convinced decided satisfied sure clear

bare empty free stark vacant vacuous void clear  
boot fling heave hurl launch project toss cast  
predicament crisis contingency plight state pass  
collapse duck flop tumble pitch plummet drop  
format framework order scheme structure form  
beacon bulb dawn flash ray shine torch light

model pattern fashion form appearance contour cast  
luminous radiant clear sunny ablaze aglow light  
ebb fade wane depart drop end die decease pass

Information about Evie Shockley can be found here: <https://poets.org/poet/evie-shockley>

### **Thirty Lines About the 'Fro**

Allison Joseph, 1967

The fro is homage, shrubbery, and revolt—all at once.  
The fro and pick have a co-dependent relationship, so  
many strands, snags, such snap and sizzle between  
the two. The fro wants to sleep on a silk pillowcase,  
abhorring the historical atrocity of cotton.

The fro guffaws at relaxers—how could any other style  
claim relaxation when the fro has a gangsta lean,  
diamond-in-the-back, sun-roof top kinda attitude,  
growing slowly from scalp into sky, launching pad  
for brilliance and bravery, for ideas uncontained by  
barbershops and their maniacal clippers, monotony  
of the fade and buzzcut. The fro has much respect  
for dreads, but won't go through life that twisted,  
that coiled. Still, much love lives between  
the two: secret handshakes, funk-bottomed struts.  
The fro doesn't hate you because you're beautiful.  
Or ugly. Or out-of-work or working for the Man.  
Because who knows who the Man is anymore?  
Is the president the Man? He used to have a fro

the size of Toledo, but now it's trimmed down  
to respectability, more gray sneaking in each day,  
and you've got to wonder if he misses his pick,  
for he must have had one of those black power ones  
with a fist on the end. After all, the fro is a fist,  
all curled power, rebellious shake, impervious  
and improper. Water does not scare the fro,  
because water cannot change that which is  
immutable—that soul-sonic force, that sly  
stone-tastic, natural mystic, roots-and-rhythm  
crown for the ages, blessed by God and gratitude.

Information about Allison Joseph can be found here: <https://poets.org/poet/allison-joseph>

### **A Tempest in a Teacup**

by A. Van Jordan, 1965--

*Prospero*

Assume, just for a moment,  
I am denied a job  
in the factory of my dreams  
under the fluorescent lights  
of a porcelain white foreman.

It's orderly and neat.  
I feed my family.  
No one questions my face.  
I raised my son in my likeness,  
so he would never go unseen,

bobbing on a wave of expectation,  
I set in motion with my back  
put into my work, praying  
for my country, blessed  
with more of me, never worrying

about those who might die,  
or those who did, trying  
to stir a storm, trying  
to stand where I'm standing.

**"Que Sera Sera"**

BY A. VAN JORDAN, 1965--

In my car, driving through Black Mountain,  
North Carolina, I listen to what  
sounds like Doris Day shooting  
heroin inside Sly Stone's throat.

One would think that she fights  
to get out, but she wants to stay  
free in this skin. *Fresh*,  
The Family Stone's album,

came out in '73, but I didn't make sense  
of it till '76, sixth grade for me,  
the Bicentennial, I got my first kiss that year,  
I beat up the class bully; I was the man.

But for now, in my head, it's only '73  
and I'm a little boy again, listening  
to Sly and his Family covering Doris's hit,  
driving down I-40;

a cop pulls me over to ask why  
I'm here, in his town, with my Yankee tags.  
I let him ask a series of questions  
about what kind of work I do,

what brings me to town—you know  
the kind of questions that tell you  
this has nothing to do with driving a car.  
My hands want to ball into fists.

But, instead, I tell myself to write a letter  
to the Chief of Police, to give him something



to laugh at over his morning paper,  
as I try to recall the light in Doris Day's version

of "Que Sera Sera" — without the wail  
troubling the notes in the duet  
of Sly and Cynthia's voices.  
Hemingway meant to define  
courage by the nonchalance you exude  
while taking cover within your flesh,  
even at the risk of losing  
what some would call a melody;  
I call it the sound of home.  
Like when a song gets so far out  
on a solo you almost don't recognize it,  
but then you get back to the hook, you suddenly

recognize the tune and before you know it,  
you're putting your hands together; you're on your feet —  
because you recognize a sound, like a light,  
leading you back home to a color:

rust. You must remember  
rust—not too red, not too orange—not fire or overnight  
change, but a simmering-summer  
change in which children play till they tire

and grown folks sit till they grow edgy  
or neighborhood dogs bite those not from your neighborhood  
and someone with some sense says Down, Boy,  
or you hope someone has some sense

who's outside or who owns the dog and then the sky  
turns rust and the streetlights buzz on  
and someone's mother, must be yours, says  
You see those streetlights on don't you,

and then everybody else's mother comes out and says  
the same thing and the sky is rust so you know  
you got about ten minutes before she comes back out  
and embarrasses you in front of your friends;

ten minutes to get home before you eat and watch  
the *Flip Wilson Show* or *Sanford and Son* and it's time for bed.  
And it's rust you need to remember  
when the cop asks, What kind of work you do?

It's rust you need to remember: the smell  
of summer rain on the sidewalk  
and the patina on wrought-iron railings on your front porch  
with rust patches on them, and the smell

of fresh mowed grass and gasoline and sweat  
of your childhood as he takes a step back  
when you tell him you're a poet teaching  
English down the road at the college,

when he takes a step back—  
to assure you, know, that this has nothing to do with race,  
but the rust of a community he believes  
he keeps safe, and he says Have a Good One,

meaning day as he swaggers back to his car,  
and the color of the day and the face behind sunglasses  
and the hands on his hips you'll always remember  
come back gunmetal gray

for the rest of this rusty afternoon.  
So you roll up the window  
and turn the music back on,  
and try to remember the rust caught in Sly's throat—

when the song came out in '73,  
although I didn't get it till '76,  
sixth grade for me, the Bicentennial;  
I got my first kiss that year.

I beat up the class bully.  
I was the man.

Information on A. Van Jordan here: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/a-van-jordan>

## Middle Passage

Robert Hayden, 1913-1980

### I

*Jesús, Estrella, Esperanza, Mercy:*

Sails flashing to the wind like weapons,  
sharks following the moans the fever and the dying;  
horror the corposant and compass rose.

Middle Passage:

voyage through death  
to life upon these shores.

“10 April 1800—  
Blacks rebellious. Crew uneasy. Our linguist says  
their moaning is a prayer for death,  
ours and their own. Some try to starve themselves.  
Lost three this morning leaped with crazy laughter  
to the waiting sharks, sang as they went under.”

*Desire, Adventure, Tartar, Ann:*

Standing to America, bringing home  
black gold, black ivory, black seed.

*Deep in the festering hold thy father lies,  
of his bones New England pews are made,  
those are altar lights that were his eyes.*

Jesus Saviour Pilot Me  
Over Life's Tempestuous Sea

We pray that Thou wilt grant, O Lord,  
safe passage to our vessels bringing

heathen souls unto Thy chastening.

Jesus Saviour

“8 bells. I cannot sleep, for I am sick  
with fear, but writing eases fear a little  
since still my eyes can see these words take shape  
upon the page & so I write, as one  
would turn to exorcism. 4 days scudding,  
but now the sea is calm again. Misfortune  
follows in our wake like sharks (our grinning  
tutelary gods). Which one of us  
has killed an albatross? A plague among  
our blacks—Ophthalmia: blindness—& we  
have jettisoned the blind to no avail.  
It spreads, the terrifying sickness spreads.  
Its claws have scratched sight from the Capt.'s eyes  
& there is blindness in the fo'c'sle  
& we must sail 3 weeks before we come  
to port.”

*What port awaits us, Davy Jones'  
or home? I've heard of slavers drifting, drifting,  
playthings of wind and storm and chance, their crews  
gone blind, the jungle hatred  
crawling up on deck.*

Thou Who Walked On Galilee

“Deponent further sayeth *The Bella J*  
left the Guinea Coast  
with cargo of five hundred blacks and odd  
for the barracoons of Florida:

“That there was hardly room 'tween-decks for half  
the sweltering cattle stowed spoon-fashion there;  
that some went mad of thirst and tore their flesh  
and sucked the blood:

“That Crew and Captain lusted with the comeliest

of the savage girls kept naked in the cabins;  
that there was one they called The Guinea Rose  
and they cast lots and fought to lie with her:

“That when the Bo’s’n piped all hands, the flames  
spreading from starboard already were beyond  
control, the negroes howling and their chains  
entangled with the flames:

“That the burning blacks could not be reached,  
that the Crew abandoned ship,  
leaving their shrieking negresses behind,  
that the Captain perished drunken with the wenches:

“Further Deponent sayeth not.”

Pilot Oh Pilot Me

## II

Aye, lad, and I have seen those factories,  
Gambia, Rio Pongo, Calabar;  
have watched the artful mongos baiting traps  
of war wherein the victor and the vanquished

Were caught as prizes for our barracoons.  
Have seen the nigger kings whose vanity  
and greed turned wild black hides of Fellatah,  
Mandingo, Ibo, Kru to gold for us.

And there was one—King Anthracite we named him—  
fetish face beneath French parasols  
of brass and orange velvet, impudent mouth  
whose cups were carven skulls of enemies:

He’d honor us with drum and feast and conjo  
and palm-oil-glistening wenches deft in love,  
and for tin crowns that shone with paste,  
red calico and German-silver trinkets

Would have the drums talk war and send  
his warriors to burn the sleeping villages  
and kill the sick and old and lead the young  
in coffles to our factories.

Twenty years a trader, twenty years,  
for there was wealth aplenty to be harvested  
from those black fields, and I'd be trading still  
but for the fevers melting down my bones.

### III

Shuttles in the rocking loom of history,  
the dark ships move, the dark ships move,  
their bright ironical names  
like jests of kindness on a murderer's mouth;  
plough through thrashing glister toward  
fata morgana's lucent melting shore,  
weave toward New World littorals that are  
mirage and myth and actual shore.

Voyage through death,  
                                voyage whose chartings are unlove.

A charnel stench, effluvium of living death  
spreads outward from the hold,  
where the living and the dead, the horribly dying,  
lie interlocked, lie foul with blood and excrement.

*Deep in the festering hold thy father lies,  
the corpse of mercy rots with him,  
rats eat love's rotten gelid eyes.*

*But, oh, the living look at you  
with human eyes whose suffering accuses you,  
whose hatred reaches through the swill of dark  
to strike you like a leper's claw.*

*You cannot stare that hatred down  
or chain the fear that stalks the watches  
and breathes on you its fetid scorching breath;  
cannot kill the deep immortal human wish,  
the timeless will.*

“But for the storm that flung up barriers  
of wind and wave, *The Amistad*, señores,  
would have reached the port of Príncipe in two,  
three days at most; but for the storm we should  
have been prepared for what befell.  
Swift as the puma’s leap it came. There was  
that interval of moonless calm filled only  
with the water’s and the rigging’s usual sounds,  
then sudden movement, blows and snarling cries  
and they had fallen on us with machete  
and marlinspike. It was as though the very  
air, the night itself were striking us.  
Exhausted by the rigors of the storm,  
we were no match for them. Our men went down  
before the murderous Africans. Our loyal  
Celestino ran from below with gun  
and lantern and I saw, before the cane-  
knife’s wounding flash, Cinquez,  
that surly brute who calls himself a prince,  
directing, urging on the ghastly work.  
He hacked the poor mulatto down, and then  
he turned on me. The decks were slippery  
when daylight finally came. It sickens me  
to think of what I saw, of how these apes  
threw overboard the butchered bodies of  
our men, true Christians all, like so much jetsam.  
Enough, enough. The rest is quickly told:  
Cinquez was forced to spare the two of us  
you see to steer the ship to Africa,  
and we like phantoms doomed to rove the sea  
voyaged east by day and west by night,  
deceiving them, hoping for rescue,  
prisoners on our own vessel, till  
at length we drifted to the shores of this

your land, America, where we were freed  
from our unspeakable misery. Now we  
demand, good sirs, the extradition of  
Cinquez and his accomplices to La  
Havana. And it distresses us to know  
there are so many here who seem inclined  
to justify the mutiny of these blacks.  
We find it paradoxical indeed  
that you whose wealth, whose tree of liberty  
are rooted in the labor of your slaves  
should suffer the august John Quincy Adams  
to speak with so much passion of the right  
of chattel slaves to kill their lawful masters  
and with his Roman rhetoric weave a hero's  
garland for Cinquez. I tell you that  
we are determined to return to Cuba  
with our slaves and there see justice done. Cinquez—  
or let us say 'the Prince'—Cinquez shall die."

The deep immortal human wish,  
the timeless will:

Cinquez its deathless primaveral image,  
life that transfigures many lives.

Voyage through death  
to life upon these shores.

### **Frederick Douglass**

BY ROBERT HAYDEN, 1913-1980

When it is finally ours, this freedom, this liberty, this beautiful  
and terrible thing, needful to man as air,  
usable as earth; when it belongs at last to all,  
when it is truly instinct, brain matter, diastole, systole,  
reflex action; when it is finally won; when it is more  
than the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians:  
this man, this Douglass, this former slave, this Negro  
beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning a world  
where none is lonely, none hunted, alien,



this man, superb in love and logic, this man  
shall be remembered. Oh, not with statues' rhetoric,  
not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze alone,  
but with the lives grown out of his life, the lives  
fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing.

### **Those Winter Sundays**

Robert Hayden, 1913-1980

Sundays too my father got up early  
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,  
then with cracked hands that ached  
from labor in the weekday weather made  
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.  
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,  
and slowly I would rise and dress,  
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,  
who had driven out the cold  
and polished my good shoes as well.  
What did I know, what did I know  
of love's austere and lonely offices?

Information on Robert Hayden can be found here: <https://poets.org/poet/robert-hayden>

### **Blue**

CARL PHILLIPS, 1959--

As through marble or the lining of  
certain fish split open and scooped  
clean, this is the blue vein  
that rides, where the flesh is even  
whiter than the rest of her, the splayed  
thighs mother forgets, busy struggling  
for command over bones: her own,

those of the chaise longue, all  
equally uncooperative, and there's  
the wind, too. This is her hair, gone  
from white to blue in the air.

This is the black, shot with blue, of my dark  
daddy's knuckles, that do not change, ever.  
Which is to say they are no more pale  
in anger than at rest, or when, as  
I imagine them now, they follow  
the same two fingers he has always used  
to make the rim of every empty blue  
glass in the house sing.  
Always, the same  
blue-to-black sorrow  
no black surface can entirely hide.

Under the night, somewhere  
between the white that is nothing so much as  
blue, and the black that is, finally; nothing,  
I am the man neither of you remembers.  
Shielding, in the half-dark,  
the blue eyes I sometimes forget  
I don't have. Pulling my own stoop-  
shouldered kind of blues across paper.  
Apparently misinformed about the rumored  
stuff of dreams: everywhere I inquired,  
I was told look for blue.

### **Something to Believe In**

**Carl Phillips, 1959--**

My two hunting dogs have names, but I rarely use them. As  
*I go, they go*: I lead; they follow, the blue-eyed one first, then  
the one whose coloring—her coat, not her eyes—I sometimes  
call never-again-o-never-this-way-henceforth. Hope, ambition:  
these are not their names, though the way they run might suggest  
otherwise. Like steam off night-soaked wooden fencing when

the sun first hits it, they rise each morning at my command. Late in the *Iliad*, Priam the king of Troy predicts his own murder — correctly, except it won't be by spear, as he imagines, but by sword thrust. He can see his corpse, sees the dogs he's fed and trained so patiently pulling the corpse apart. After that, he says, When they're full, they'll lie in the doorway, they'll lap my blood. I say: Why shouldn't they? Everywhere, the same people who mistake obedience for loyalty think somehow loyalty weighs more than hunger, when it doesn't. At night, when it's time for bed, we sleep together, the three of us: muscled animal, muscled animal, muscled animal. The dogs settle to either side of me as if each were the slightly folded wing of a beast from fable, part power, part recognition. We breathe in a loose kind of unison. Our breathing ripples the way oblivion does — routinely, across history's face.

Information on Carl Phillips can be found here:  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carl-phillips>

## Heartbeats

*Melvin Dixon, 1950-1992*

Work out. Ten laps.  
Chin ups. Look good.

Steam room. Dress warm.  
Call home. Fresh air.

Eat right. Rest well.  
Sweetheart. Safe sex.

Sore throat. Long flu.  
Hard nodes. Beware.

Test blood. Count cells.  
Reds thin. Whites low.

Dress warm. Eat well.  
Short breath. Fatigue.

Night sweats. Dry cough.  
Loose stools. Weight loss.

Get mad. Fight back.  
Call home. Rest well.

Don't cry. Take charge.  
No sex. Eat right.

Call home. Talk slow.  
Chin up. No air.

Arms wide. Nodes hard.  
Cough dry. Hold on.

Mouth wide. Drink this.  
Breathe in. Breathe out.

No air. Breathe in.  
Breathe in. No air.

Black out. White rooms.  
Head hot. Feet cold.

No work. Eat right.  
CAT scan. Chin up.

Breathe in. Breathe out.  
No air. No air.

Thin blood. Sore lungs.  
Mouth dry. Mind gone.

Six months? Three weeks?  
Can't eat. No air.

Today? Tonight?  
It waits. For me.

Sweet heart. Don't stop.  
Breathe in. Breathe out.

Information about Melvin Dixon can be found here: <https://poets.org/poet/melvin-dixon>

### **Do-rag**

PHILLIP B WILLIAMS, 1986—

O darling, the moon did not disrobe you.  
You fell asleep that way, nude  
and capsized by our wine, our Bump

'n' Grind shenanigans. Blame it  
on whatever you like; my bed welcomes  
whomever you decide to be: thug-

mistress, poinsettia, John Doe  
in the alcove of my dreams. You  
can quote verbatim an entire album

of Bone Thugs-n-Harmony  
with your ass in the air. There's nothing  
wrong with that. They mince syllables

as you call me yours. You don't  
like me but still invite me to your home  
when your homies aren't near

enough to hear us crash into each other  
like hours. Some men have killed  
their lovers because they loved them

so much in secret that the secret kept  
coming out: wife gouging her husband  
with suspicion, churches sneering

when an usher enters. Never mind that.  
The sickle moon turns the sky into  
a man's mouth slapped sideways

to keep him from spilling what no one would  
understand: you call me God when it

gets good though I do not exist to you

outside this room. Be yourself or no one else  
here. Your do-rag is camouflage-patterned  
and stuffed into my mouth.

Information on Phillip B Williams can be found here:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/phillip-b-williams>

### **The Aureole**

BY NIKKY FINNEY, 1957--

(for E)

I stop my hand midair.

If I touch her there everything about me will be true.  
The New World discovered without pick or ax.

I will be what Brenda Jones was stoned for in 1969.  
I saw it as a girl but didn't know I was taking in myself.

My hand remembers, treading the watery room,  
just behind the rose-veiled eyes of memory.

Alone in the yard tucked beneath the hood of her car,  
lucky clover all about her feet, green tea-sweet necklace  
for her mud-pie crusty work boots.

She fends off their spit & words with silent two-handed  
twists & turns of her socket wrench. A hurl of sticks &  
stones and only me to whisper for her, from sidewalk far,

*break my bones.* A grown woman in grease-pocket overalls  
inside her own sexy transmission despite the crowding of  
hurled red hots. Beneath the hood of her candy-apple Camaro:

souped, shiny, low to the ground.

The stars over the Atlantic are dangling

salt crystals. The room at the Seashell Inn is \$20 a night; special winter off-season rate. No one else here but us and the night clerk, five floors below, alone with his cherished stack of *Spiderman*. My lips are red snails in a primal search for every constellation hiding in the sky of your body. My hand waits for permission, for my life to agree to be changed, forever. Can Captain Night Clerk hear my fingers tambourining you there on the moon? Won't he soon climb the stairs and *bam!* on the hood of this car? You are a woman with film reels for eyes. Years of long talking have brought us to the land of the body. Our skin is one endless prayer bead of brown. If my hand ever lands, I will fly past dreaming Australian Aborigines. The old claw hammer and monkey wrench that flew at Brenda Jones will fly across the yard of ocean at me. A grease rag will be thrust into my painter's pants against my will. I will never be able to wash or peel any of this away. Before the night is over someone I do not know will want the keys to my '55 silver Thunderbird. He will chase me down the street. A gaggle of spooked hens will fly up in my grandmother's yard, never to lay another egg, just as I am jumped, kneed, pulled finally to the high ground of sweet clover.

Information on Nikky Finney here: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/nikky-finney>

### **Who Said It Was Simple**

BY AUDRE LORDE, 1934-1992

There are so many roots to the tree of anger  
that sometimes the branches shatter

before they bear.

Sitting in Nedicks

the women rally before they march  
discussing the problematic girls  
they hire to make them free.

An almost white counterman passes  
a waiting brother to serve them first  
and the ladies neither notice nor reject  
the slighter pleasures of their slavery.  
But I who am bound by my mirror  
as well as my bed  
see causes in colour  
as well as sex

and sit here wondering  
which me will survive  
all these liberations.

### **Sisters in Arms**

Audre Lorde, 1934-1992

The edge of our bed was a wide grid  
where your fifteen-year-old daughter was hanging  
gut-sprung on police wheels  
a cablegram nailed to the wood  
next to a map of the Western Reserve  
I could not return with you to bury the body  
reconstruct your nightly cardboards  
against the seeping Transvaal cold  
I could not plant the other limpet mine  
against a wall at the railroad station  
nor carry either of your souls back from the river  
in a calabash upon my head  
so I bought you a ticket to Durban  
on my American Express  
and we lay together  
in the first light of a new season.



Now clearing roughage from my autumn garden  
cow sorrel overgrown rocket gone to seed  
I reach for the taste of today  
the *New York Times* finally mentions your country  
a half-page story  
of the first white south african killed in the "unrest"  
Not of Black children massacred at Sebokeng  
six-year-olds imprisoned for threatening the state  
not of Thabo Sibeko, first grader, in his own blood  
on his grandmother's parlor floor  
Joyce, nine, trying to crawl to him  
shitting through her navel  
not of a three-week-old infant, nameless  
lost under the burned beds of Tembisa  
my hand comes down like a brown vise over the marigolds  
reckless through despair  
we were two Black women touching our flame  
and we left our dead behind us  
I hovered you rose the last ritual of healing  
"It is spring," you whispered  
"I sold the ticket for guns and sulfa  
I leave for home tomorrow"  
and wherever I touch you  
I lick cold from my fingers  
taste rage  
like salt from the lips of a woman  
who has killed too often to forget  
and carries each death in her eyes  
your mouth a parting orchid  
"Someday you will come to *my* country  
and we will fight side by side?"

Keys jingle in the door ajar threatening  
whatever is coming belongs here  
I reach for your sweetness  
but silence explodes like a pregnant belly  
into my face  
a vomit of nevers.

Mmanthatisi turns away from the cloth

her daughters-in-law are dyeing  
the baby drools milk from her breast  
she hands him half-asleep to his sister  
dresses again for war  
knowing the men will follow.  
In the intricate Maseru twilights  
quick sad vital  
she maps the next day's battle  
dreams of Durban sometimes  
visions the deep wry song of beach pebbles  
running after the sea.

### **Now**

Audre Lorde, 1934-1992

Woman power  
is  
Black power  
is  
Human power  
is  
always feeling  
my heart beats  
as my eyes open  
as my hands move  
as my mouth speaks

I am  
are you

Ready.

Information about Audre Lorde can be found here:  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/audre-lorde>

## The Idea of Ancestry

Etheridge Knight, 1931-1991

1

Taped to the wall of my cell are 47 pictures: 47 black faces: my father, mother, grandmothers (1 dead), grandfathers (both dead), brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins (1st and 2nd), nieces, and nephews. They stare across the space at me sprawling on my bunk. I know their dark eyes, they know mine. I know their style, they know mine. I am all of them, they are all of me; they are farmers, I am a thief, I am me, they are thee.

I have at one time or another been in love with my mother, 1 grandmother, 2 sisters, 2 aunts (1 went to the asylum), and 5 cousins. I am now in love with a 7-yr-old niece (she sends me letters in large block print, and her picture is the only one that smiles at me).

I have the same name as 1 grandfather, 3 cousins, 3 nephews, and 1 uncle. The uncle disappeared when he was 15, just took off and caught a freight (they say). He's discussed each year when the family has a reunion, he causes uneasiness in the clan, he is an empty space. My father's mother, who is 93 and who keeps the Family Bible with everybody's birth dates (and death dates) in it, always mentions him. There is no place in her Bible for "whereabouts unknown."

2

Each fall the graves of my grandfathers call me, the brown hills and red gullies of mississippi send out their electric messages, galvanizing my genes. Last yr/like a salmon quitting the cold ocean-leaping and bucking up his birth stream/I hitchhiked my way from LA with 16 caps in my pocket and a monkey on my back. And I almost kicked it with the kinfolks. I walked barefooted in my grandmother's backyard/I smelled the old

land and the woods/I sipped cornwhiskey from fruit jars with the men/  
I flirted with the women/I had a ball till the caps ran out  
and my habit came down. That night I looked at my grandmother  
and split/my guts were screaming for junk/but I was almost  
contented/I had almost caught up with me.  
(The next day in Memphis I cracked a croaker's crib for a fix.)

This yr there is a gray stone wall damming my stream, and when  
the falling leaves stir my genes, I pace my cell or flop on my bunk  
and stare at 47 black faces across the space. I am all of them,  
they are all of me, I am me, they are thee, and I have no children  
to float in the space between.

Information about Etheridge Knight here: <https://poets.org/poem/idea-ancestry>

## **Inheritance**

Camille Rankine, 198?--

What have I  
To say in my wrong tongue  
Of what is gone To know something is  
Lost but what You have forgotten what  
You long forgot If I am  
What survives I am here but I am not  
Much of anything at all To be what's left  
And all the rest scooped out  
And dropped into the sea My flesh  
Forming a knot on itself is a habit  
Learned from whom A mind reaching back  
Into the dark a body releasing itself  
Backward into space a faith  
I have no prayer in which to keep  
Am I home or merely caught  
Between two unmarked graves  
I'm saying where we live  
It's a mistake A compromise  
I'm made to make  
I'm told come willingly  
Halfway across a bridge to where

I'm halfway human Or else  
A door bricked over  
Behind which all I am  
To be shadow cast by shadows cast  
By no one's hand And now  
Whose fault am I It's said  
I stand against the grain  
Of natural law A being in chaos  
In argument with itself What would it be  
To be simply I am here but what of me  
That's gone stays gone

Information about Camille Rankine can be found here: <https://poets.org/poet/camille-rankine>

## For My People

Margaret Walker, 1914-1997

For my people everywhere singing their slave songs  
repeatedly: their dirges and their ditties and their blues  
and jubilees, praying their prayers nightly to an  
unknown god, bending their knees humbly to an  
unseen power;

For my people lending their strength to the years, to the  
gone years and the now years and the maybe years,  
washing ironing cooking scrubbing sewing mending  
hoeing plowing digging planting pruning patching  
dragging along never gaining never reaping never  
knowing and never understanding;

For my playmates in the clay and dust and sand of Alabama  
backyards playing baptizing and preaching and doctor  
and jail and soldier and school and mama and cooking  
and playhouse and concert and store and hair and Miss  
Choomby and company;

For the cramped bewildered years we went to school to learn  
to know the reasons why and the answers to and the  
people who and the places where and the days when, in  
memory of the bitter hours when we discovered we  
were black and poor and small and different and nobody  
cared and nobody wondered and nobody understood;

For the boys and girls who grew in spite of these things to  
be man and woman, to laugh and dance and sing and  
play and drink their wine and religion and success, to  
marry their playmates and bear children and then die  
of consumption and anemia and lynching;

For my people thronging 47th Street in Chicago and Lenox  
Avenue in New York and Rampart Street in New  
Orleans, lost disinherited dispossessed and happy  
people filling the cabarets and taverns and other  
people's pockets needing bread and shoes and milk and  
land and money and something—something all our own;

For my people walking blindly spreading joy, losing time  
being lazy, sleeping when hungry, shouting when  
burdened, drinking when hopeless, tied, and shackled  
and tangled among ourselves by the unseen creatures  
who tower over us omnisciently and laugh;

For my people blundering and groping and floundering in  
the dark of churches and schools and clubs and  
societies, associations and councils and committees and  
conventions, distressed and disturbed and deceived and  
devoured by money-hungry glory-craving leeches,  
preyed on by facile force of state and fad and novelty, by  
false prophet and holy believer;

For my people standing staring trying to fashion a better way  
from confusion, from hypocrisy and misunderstanding,  
trying to fashion a world that will hold all the people,  
all the faces, all the adams and eves and their countless  
generations;

Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second generation full of courage issue forth; let a people loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of men now rise and take control.

Information on Margaret Walker can be found here: <https://poets.org/poet/margaret-walker>