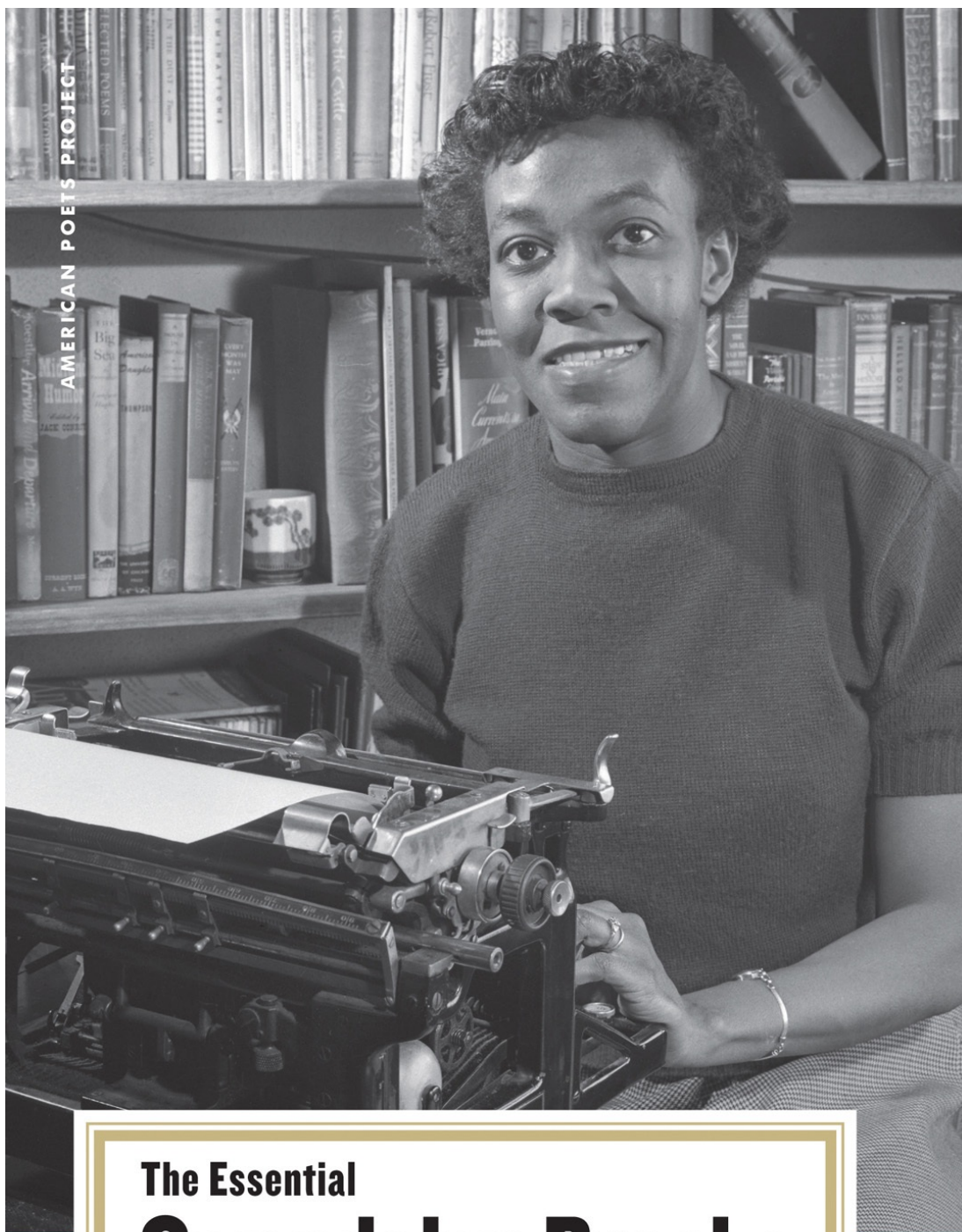


AMERICAN POETS PROJECT

The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks

EDITED BY
ELIZABETH ALEXANDER



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Gwendolyn Brooks



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INTRODUCTION

Since she began publishing her tight lyrics of Chicago's great South Side in the 1940s, Gwendolyn Brooks has been one of the most influential American poets of the twentieth century. Her poems distill the very best aspects of Modernist style with the sounds and shapes of various African-American forms and idioms. Brooks is a consummate portraitist who found worlds in the community she wrote out of, and her innovations as a sonneteer remain an inspiration to more than one generation of poets who have come after her. Her career as a whole also offers an example of an artist who was willing to respond and evolve in the face of the dramatic historical, political, and aesthetic changes and challenges she lived through.

Gwendolyn Elizabeth Brooks was born in 1917 in Topeka, Kansas, the daughter of Keziah Wims Brooks and David Anderson Brooks. Her father aspired to be a doctor and studied medicine for a year and a half at Fisk, but ended up working as a janitor. He was the son of a runaway slave. Her mother was a teacher before her marriage and then turned her full attention to homemaking, attending fiercely to the creative talent of young Gwendolyn from an early age. Her mother would tell her that she was going to be "the *lady* Paul Laurence Dunbar." The family moved to Chicago shortly after Brooks's birth, and she would spend the rest of her life on that city's South Side—a great "Negro metropolis"—through years when the innovation, strength, struggle, and vision of its black residents gave her a backdrop and context for all that would interest her in her work.

The Chicago of Brooks's formative years bustled with creative and political energy. Black Southern migrants from the second wave of the Great Migration flocked to the city in large numbers. In 1936, Harlem was the only neighborhood in the United States with a larger black population than Chicago's South Side. For many of the Chicago characters in Brooks's poems, as well as its real-life residents, the rural South was close at hand in memory and ways even as people navigated the rough and ready wind-whipped city. The South represented the beauty of home ways, but it was also the economically, spiritually, and physically violent home of white supremacy.

In 1935, the WPA Federal Writers' Project began, and Chicago was a hive of subsidized artistic activity that often dovetailed with progressive interracial (if problematically so) political movements. More artists participated in the Federal Writers' Project in Chicago than in any other city in the United States. In 1936, the novelist Richard Wright formed the South Side Writers group that included poets Frank Marshall Davis and Margaret Walker, playwright Theodore Ward, and the admired poet-critic Edward Bland, who died in World War II and whom Brooks memorialized in a poem. In the flourishing years from 1935 to the end of World War II, Chicago was home at various times to a collection of creative people that rivaled the Harlem Renaissance. There were artists such as Charles Sebree, Eldzier Cortor, Charles White, Elizabeth Catlett, Gordon Parks, Hughie Lee-Smith, Archibald Motley, and writers such as Wright, Walker, Davis, Fenton Johnson, Margaret Cunningham Danner, Margaret Burroughs, Bernard Goss, Arna Bontemps, Frank Yerby, Marita Bonner, and Willard Motley. Dancer Katherine Dunham was finishing her studies in anthropology at the University of Chicago. Paul Robeson and Langston Hughes would frequently pass through and connect with that crowd. Claude McKay attended the publication party for Brooks's first book. In the first installment of her autobiography, *Report From Part One*, Brooks describes the exciting social life that she and her husband, Henry, enjoyed in the early 1940s:

My husband and I knew writers, knew painters, knew pianists and dancers and actresses, knew photographers galore. There were always weekend parties to be attended where we merry Bronzevillians could find each other and earnestly philosophize sometimes on into the dawn, over martinis and Scotch and coffee and an ample buffet. Great social decisions were reached. Great solutions for great problems were provided. . . . Of course, in that time, it was believed, still, that the society could be prettied, quieted, cradled, sweetened, if only people talked enough, glared at each other yearningly enough, waited enough.

The black press was also a powerful force. John Sengstacke was building the *Chicago Defender* into the most noted black paper in the country, where one could regularly read cutting-edge political news, poetry, and the column by Langston Hughes which began in 1942. John Johnson, who went on to found and publish *Jet*, *Ebony*, *Sepia*, and *Negro Digest/Black World*, under the aegis of his Johnson Publications, was in a writers' group with Brooks.

Brooks attended junior college, began working, and soon married Henry Blakely, who was also a poet. They were both intensely devoted to their work, though like most poets they did other work for money. Their first child, Henry Jr., was born in 1940. In 1941, Brooks joined a poetry workshop organized by a wealthy white woman, Inez Cunningham Stark, who had been the president of the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago and had helped bring the likes of Leger, Prokofiev, and Le Corbusier to the city. Stark also had a long affiliation with *Poetry*, one of the most influential literary magazines of its time. In Stark's all-black workshop, held in the South Shore Community Center, writers studied Modernist poets and rigorously critiqued one another's work. In Brooks's teenage correspondence with James Weldon Johnson (whose 1922 and 1931 editions of the *Book of American Negro Poetry* would undoubtedly have brought the best of the African-American tradition to the young poet), Johnson had urged her to read Eliot, Pound, and Cummings; she was well-read on her

own, and so already familiar with the Modernists. But the intensive group study and conversation in the Stark workshop was galvanizing. They studied *Poetry* magazine (which Brooks continued to support by creating prizes for the magazine over the years) and moved forward in intent and focus with their poems and ambitions. Though Brooks had first published poems when she was a teenager, during this period she began to see publication in serious journals and to win prizes.

Brooks's first collection of poems, *A Street in Bronzeville*, was published by Harper & Brothers in 1945. The poet Paul Engle wrote the book's first review, in the *Chicago Tribune* book section: "The publication of *A Street in Bronzeville* is an exceptional event in the literary life of Chicago, for it is the first book of a solidly Chicago person." He called her a "young but permanent talent."

The poems of *A Street in Bronzeville* incorporate many aspects of poetic tradition and conversation. Brooks is attuned to the sounds heard and spoken in various spaces on Chicago's South Side. "If you wanted a poem," she wrote in her autobiography, "you only had to look out of a window. There was material always, walking or running, fighting or screaming or singing." She writes of the front and back yards, beauty shops, vacant lots, and bars. Her formal range is most impressive, as she experiments with sonnets, ballads, spirituals, blues, full and off-rhymes. She is nothing short of a technical virtuoso. Her incisive, distilled portraits of individuals taken together give us a collage of a very specific community, in the fashion of Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* and Jean Toomer's *Cane*. And in that keen and satisfying specificity are universal questions: How do people tend their dreams in the face of day-to-day struggle? How do people constitute community? How do communities respond when their young are sent off to a war full of ironies and contradictions? How do black communities grapple with the problems of materialism, racism, and blind religiosity? Brooks took especially seriously the inner lives of young black women: their hopes, dreams, aspirations, disappointments. How do they

make their analytical voices heard in their communities? She continued to explore these themes in her second book, *Annie Allen*.

In the first half of the twentieth century, black writers were still confronted with the pressure, as had Phillis Wheatley, to effectively “prove” their literacy—and, thus, their humanity—through mastery of European forms. Paul Laurence Dunbar, for example, was a soul tormented by many demons, and he lamented the constraints white audiences placed on his work. According to James Weldon Johnson, Dunbar often said, “I’ve got to write dialect poetry; it’s the only way I can get them to listen to me,” and toward the end of his brief life he confessed to Johnson, “I have not grown. I am writing the same things I wrote ten years ago, and I am writing them no better.” Countee Cullen knew that many saw him as representative and the future of the race and its prime ambassador on the cultural front. So writing expertly within prescribed European forms was a particular, if implicit, pressure on both these relatively successful black poets, Brooks’s generational predecessors whom we know she read and studied and who, like her, favored the sonnet. This form suited Dunbar and Cullen and they spread their wings elegantly within it, but they also labored under the expectation that certain rules must be followed in order to assure one’s place within the mainstream canon. Brooks, on the other hand, worked with expert subtlety to make the sonnet her own.

In *A Street in Bronzeville*, she concludes with a series of off-rhyme sonnets on black soldiers in World War II, “Gay Chaps at the Bar.” Brooks grasped the profound contradictions these soldiers faced, fighting for their country but knowing all along that they would remain second-class citizens—think, for example, of black soldiers who liberated concentration camps being forced to ride in the back cars of military trains upon their return while German prisoners of war rode in the front. Brooks said that the sonnets of “Gay Chaps at the Bar” are off-rhyme because “I felt it was an off-rhyme situation.” Within conventional form, Brooks made subtle breaks so that her poetics underscore and enact what she speaks of. In so doing, she makes the form do something unexpected and

makes an argument for the absolute rightness and necessity of innovating from within that form to make poetry that speaks powerfully to and out of its black reality.

“The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith” is the longest poem in *A Street*. Brooks wrote it after Richard Wright evaluated an early version of the book’s manuscript for Harpers and observed that most successful volumes of poems had a long centerpiece poem around which the book coalesced. “Sundays” is a tour de force that showcases much Brooksonian strength: language that is as “rich” and “elaborate” as Satin-Legs himself but that at the same time displays awareness of its own decoration as well as of the shortcomings of decoration. Satin-Legs is a dandy whose self-image is expressed in his rococo dress and way with the ladies. “He sheds, with his pajamas, shabby days,” Brooks writes, and in that shedding and subsequent ornamentation always leaves behind “his desertedness, his intricate fear, the postponed resentments and the prim precautions.” He is in many ways a pitiable character. Brooks shows us the hysterical pitch of his wish for life’s beauty (“life must be aromatic. / There must be scent, somehow there must be some.”) and yet his wish for and will to beauty is powerful, true, and beautiful unto itself. He loves artifice but also has a “heritage of cabbage and pigtails, / Old intimacy with alleys, garbage pails, / Down in the deep (but always beautiful) South / Where roses blush their blithest (it is said) / And sweet magnolias put Chanel to shame.” Brooks also never lets us forget, in the subtlest way, that Satin-Legs’ life is set against a backdrop of economic and racial challenge.

The poem is at its mock-heroic best when Brooks takes the reader through Satin-Legs’ closet: “Let us proceed. Let us inspect, together / With his meticulous and serious love, / The innards of this closet.” Here she echoes Eliot’s Prufrock—“Let us go then, you and I”—another sad character in a similarly ironic “love song” whose love of language and beauty walks a path toward spiritual and emotional drowning. She takes great poetic pleasure in describing Satin-Legs’ “wonder-suits in yellow and in wine, / Sarcastic green

and zebra-striped cobalt,” and yet her empathy forces her to note, without condescension, “People are so in need, in need of help. / People want so much that they do not know.” The poem is mock-heroic, lament, and ballad all at once. Brooks goes beneath the masks of thwarted masculinity to show us “men estranged / From music and from wonder and from joy / But far familiar with the guiding awe / Of foodlessness.”

In her second book, *Annie Allen*, Brooks invented a form she called the “anniad” for her heroine, a “plain black girl” named Annie Allen whose interior life is richly detailed and deserving its own form; the name of course echoed the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*. She won the Pulitzer Prize for the book, the first African-American to be so honored. J. Saunders Redding praised *Annie Allen* in *Saturday Review of Literature* but said, “I do not want to see Miss Brooks’s fine talents dribble away in the obscure and the too oblique.” This note would be sounded intermittently throughout her early career by those who were not responsive to her very particular sense of aesthetics as well as those who expected black literature to speak clearly and directly “to the people” and “their issues.” Her response in later years to those pressures would prove dramatic.

Brooks and Blakely’s second child, Nora, was born in 1951. Throughout the 1950s Brooks raised her children, reviewed books, worked at her poems, and wrote and published the novel *Maud Martha*. She cast the book as a novel in hopes it would earn her more money than the meager spoils that even a Pulitzer prize-winning poet could expect. *Maud Martha* was well reviewed when it appeared, but it wasn’t until the 1980s, with black feminist scholarly interest in teaching and writing about the book, that its extraordinariness became fully appreciated and the book found its place in larger conversations about the African-American novel and formal innovation.

In 1963 she accepted her first teaching job and also published her third collection of poems, *The Bean Eaters*. Many poems in that book were explicitly tied to social issues of the day (though no more so than her poems about World War II and the Bronzeville neighborhood), such as her two poems about Emmett

Till, “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon” and “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till,” and “The Chicago *Defender* Sends a Man to Little Rock,” which is set in the context of the violent battles for school desegregation. She also further honed the concise short lyric in poems such as “The Bean Eaters,” “Old Mary,” and her most famous poem, “We Real Cool”:

We real cool. We
Left school. We

The poem's beauty lies in its economy and manipulation of space. By the end, the missing "we" that the poem's pattern has led us to anticipate is a yawning chasm, the absence of the we, these young black boys, from the poem and from the earth once they have frittered their lives away. Brooks read the poem with a swift, whispery "we," moving quickly past the word and using it metronomically to punctuate the rhythm of the poem. The poem's bebop seduces, as the boys at the pool hall are seduced by the finger-popping siren song of the street, which may make you finger-pop but ultimately offers nothing that lasts.

"Bronzeville Woman in a Red Hat" tells a small, explosive story of a white woman who is horrified to see her child kissed by the black maid. Brooks concentrates all the energy and focus of the poem on the single moment in which the white mother witnesses this kiss and experiences:

Heat at the hairline, heat between the bowels,
Examining seeming coarse unnatural scene,
She saw all things except herself serene:
Child, big black woman, pretty kitchen towels.

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

This is a scenario Brooks has explored in poems like “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters . . .”: the corrosive effects of racism on the children and white women who are a part of its system. She critiques ideologies of domestic order and white femininity that would have white women believe that the pedestals on which they’ve been placed are desirable and secure. That devastating line, “She saw all things except herself serene” is where Brooks puts the mirror to her character’s face and exposes the woman’s sense of superiority and order.

Most critics, and Brooks herself, divide her creative life into two parts. The

dividing line was 1967, when at the Fisk writers' conference—in the confrontational midst of vibrant young black writers who were envisioning a new social order and the role the arts should play in it—she had a revelation. “It frightens me to realize that if I had died before the age of fifty,” she wrote in her autobiography, “I would have died a ‘negro’ fraction.” She soon left the main stream publishing house Harper and Row and intensified her relationship and affiliation with young black poets such as Haki Madhubuti (formerly Don L. Lee), wearing her hair in what she called a “natural,” that most symbolic of hairstyles, the Afro. Further, the style of her work changed discernibly. The tight formal coil of her previous work loosened and the allusions and references were no longer as dense. ^{Jazz June. We}
^{Die soon.}

Her subject matter did not change—her subjects were still mostly black people who lived in the kitchenette apartments of Bronzeville. Brooks was always clear in her work about who black people were and what it meant to write about them. Her final collection for Harper and Row was *In the Mecca*, published in 1968. Brooks aficionados will notice one major omission from this collection, her great late 1960s epic “In the Mecca.” It is only length that prevented its inclusion here. Brooks tried to write this important poem for over thirty years—including a version in prose—after her brief stint working for a charlatan “spiritual adviser” named French who sold love and luck potions door to door in the Mecca apartment building in Chicago. The poem centers on the drama of a child named Pepita, who has gone missing in the warrens of the decrepit building. We meet the building’s residents who together form a portrait of a black community along the lines of *A Street in Bronzeville*. But in “In the Mecca” the community is in crisis and has fallen prey to its own problems. The child, who is a poet and the hope of her family and community, is found murdered under the bed of one of the building’s residents. The poem ends and so closes the first half of the book in an awful silence that asks, in 1968, what next? The poems included here from *In the Mecca* (from “Boy Breaking Glass” to “The Second Sermon on the Warpland”) serve as an answer to that question as

the community reconstitutes itself and finds a philosophy (“Conduct your blooming in the noise and whip of the whirlwind”) with which to move forward.

After *In the Mecca*, Brooks published only with black presses, from Dudley Randall’s Broadside Press to her own The David Company, ending with Madhubuti’s Third World Press. She continued to explore form and its challenges in her poems as she asked herself what it meant for her to be “an African poet.” The long poem “The Near-Johannesburg Boy,” written before the end of apartheid and with its powerful refrain “We shall flail in the Hot Time,” concludes without punctuation. Brooks said she did that “because there’s no punctuation in that situation.” She also coined the term and form “verse journalism” (as she had coined “sonnet-ballad” earlier) for the remarkable piece commissioned by *Ebony* magazine and published in August 1971, “In Montgomery,” which explored that seat of the civil rights movement in the words of its residents, after the whirl of that “hot time” was stilled. The poem was recently published in book form with other poems, some never before collected, in the posthumous book of the same name.

Brooks’s self-commentary was always pithy and vivid. In an interview conducted by Professor Joanne Gabbin, who created the Furious Flower Poetry Festival at James Madison University to commemorate Brooks’s work specifically and African-American poetry in general, Brooks made these assessments: “I am ‘an organic’ Chicagoan.” “The Black experience is any experience that a Black person has.” “I want to report; I want to record. I go inside myself, bring out what I feel, put it on paper, look at it, pull out all of the clichés. I will work hard in *that* way.” “I don’t like the term African American. It is very excluding. I like to think of Blacks as family. . . . As a people, we are not of one accord on what we should be called. Some people say it doesn’t matter, ‘call me anything.’ I think *that* is a pitiful decision.”

Brooks titled her collected poems *Blacks*. She continually strove to articulate an unambiguous race pride in a woman’s voice that was true to the complex and contradictory poetic details of black people’s lives. She was not

hyperbolic; she wrote of mighty heroes and those with feet of clay. In her very celebratoriness she practiced a kind of sober love for community. In *In the Mecca*, for example, she described “blackness stern and blunt and beautiful, / organ-rich blackness telling a terrible story.” She makes her readers think emotionally and philosophically about what it is to be black and therefore human, to struggle through blackness to struggle against and within one’s community. She made public her own struggle for racial self-acceptance in her autobiography, and she was a pioneer in her presentation of the intimate perspectives of young black protagonists whose ideas often ran counter to any expected communal doctrine.

In December 2000, Brooks died at 83. Her loved ones at her bedside said that she died literally pen in hand. On the day of her funeral, Chicago saw a snowstorm wilder and fiercer than any in years. Nonetheless, people came from all over to celebrate that great life, soul, and artistic accomplishment. There was a sense of an era coming to a close. Brooks’s work moved with the times, but her early poems remained indelible. In the 1940s her remarkable voice burst on the scene, and she was an acclaimed poet for the entire second half of the twentieth century, taking us from the age of the Harlem Renaissance through twenty years past the Black Arts and Black Power movements. She was a central figure in the equally potent parallel movements in Chicago, the late years of the Chicago renaissance in the early 1940s and then the Chicago Black Arts movement, which in a sense was institutionalized with the Gwendolyn Brooks Center at Chicago State University and the creative writing MFA there (only the second at a predominately black university), which uses writers of Africa and the African Diaspora as its core.

The late jazz-folk singer Oscar Brown, Jr., with whom Brooks worked in community arts in the early 1960s in Chicago, sang a song called “Elegy,” which is Brooks’s “of DeWitt Williams on his way to Lincoln Cemetery” set to music. The poem invokes the spiritual “Swing Low Sweet Chariot,” but as Brown sang it, he invoked no tonal remnant of the original. The poem refuses to “carry me

home.” Perhaps there is no heaven for DeWitt Williams, no heaven for so many “plain” black boys and girls, those whom Brooks “loved so well” in her poems. The repetition of “sweet” in the line “sweet sweet chariot” resists the full match of the spiritual reference and emphasizes instead the sweet life DeWitt and so many like him loved and which in part took him down: sweet women, sweet wine, “liquid joy.” And yet, true sweetness, too, which Brooks knew and understood and respected because she knew and respected the people she wrote about. She wrote truly great poems whose technical achievements are still guiding many poets. The taut strength of her lines, her formal rigor combined with subtle invention, her syntactical originality, all hold up over the years. At the end of all of this work, its sense of intimacy is most striking. She wrote poems about people she loved who lived in a place she loved and knew. Those necessary American songs had not been sung before Gwendolyn Brooks and now they have.

Elizabeth Alexander

2005

FROM

A STREET IN BRONZEVILLE | 1945

FROM **A Street in Bronzeville**

kitchenette building

We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan,
Grayed in, and gray. “Dream” makes a giddy sound, not strong
Like “rent,” “feeding a wife,” “satisfying a man.”

the mother

But could a dream send up through onion fumes
~~Abortions will not let you forget.~~
Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes
~~You remember the children you got that you did not get,~~
~~And yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall,~~
~~The damp small pulps with a little or with no hair,~~
~~Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms~~
The singers and workers that never handled the air.
You will never neglect or beat
Them, or silence or buy with a sweet.
You will never wind up the sucking-thumb
Or scuttle off ghosts that come.
You will never leave them, controlling your luscious sigh,
Return for a snack of them, with gobbling mother-eye.

hunchback girl, she thinks of heaven
Even if we were willing to let it in,
I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my dim killed children.
~~I had time to warm it, keep it very clean,~~
~~My Father, it is surely a blue place~~
~~I have contracted. I have eased.~~
~~Anticipate a message, let it begin?~~
~~And straight. Right. Regular. Where I shall find~~
My dim dears at the breasts they could never suck.
No need for scholarly nonchalance or looks
I have said, Sweets, if I sinned, if I seized
A little to the left or guards upon the
Your luck
Heart to halt love that runs without crookedness
And your lives from your unfinished reach,
Along its crooked corridors. My Father,
If I stole your births and your names,
It is a planned place surely. Out of coils,
Your straight baby tears and your games,
Unscrewed, released, no more to be marvelous,
Your silted or lovely loves, your tumults, your marriages, aches, and your
I shall walk straightly through most proper halls
deaths,
Proper myself, princess of properness.
If I poisoned the beginnings of your breaths,
Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate.
Though why should I whine,
Whine that the crime was other than mine?—
Since anyhow you are dead.
Or rather, or instead,
You were never made.
But that too, I am afraid,

Is faulty: oh, what shall I say, how is the truth to be said?
You were born, you had body, you died.
It is just that you never giggled or planned or cried.

We wonder. But not well! not for a minute!
a song in the front yard
Believe me, I loved you all.
Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now,
Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I loved you
~~We stayed in the front yard, and I hope to get in it.~~
All.
I want a peek at the back
Where it's rough and untended and hungry weed grows.
A girl gets sick of a rose.

the ballad of chocolate Mabbie

I want to go in the back yard now
It was Mabbie without the grammar school gates.
And maybe down the alley,
And Mabbie was all of seven.
To where the charity children play.
And Mabbie was cut from a chocolate bar.
I want a good time today.
And Mabbie thought life was heaven.

the preacher: ruminates behind the sermon
They do some wonderful things.
The grammar school gates were the pearly gates,
They have some wonderful fun.
I think it must be lonely to be God.
For Willie Boone went to school.
My mother sneers, but I say it's fine
Nobody loves a master. No. Despite
When she sat by him in history class
How they don't have to go in at quarter to nine.
The bright hosannas, bright dear-Lords, and bright
Was only her eyes were cool.
My mother, she tells me that Johnnie Mae
Determined reverence of Sunday eyes.
Will grow up to be a bad woman.
That George'll be taken to Jail soon or late
(On account of last winter he sold our back gate.)

But I say it's fine. Honest, I do.

Sadie and Maud
It was Maudie without the grammar school gates
And I'd like to be a bad woman, too.
Picture Jehovah striding through the hall
Waiting for Willie Boone.
And we're olive stockings of night-black lace
Of His importance, creatures running out
Half hour after the closing bell!
Sadie stayed on the streets with paint on my face.
From servant-corners to acclaim, to shout
He would surely be coming soon.
Sadie scraped life.
Appreciation of His merit's glare.
With a fine-tooth comb.

Oh, warm is the waiting for joys, my dears!
But, *when you have forgotten Sunday: the love story*
And it cannot be too long,
She didn't leave a tangle in,
To slap Him on the shoulder, tweak His ear,
Oh, *when you have forgotten*
Her comb found every strand,
Buy Him a Coca-Cola or a beer,
That *Sunday* bubble of song,
Sadie was one of the liveliest chits,
Poon-poon His politics, call Him a fool?
And most especially when you have forgotten Sunday—
In all the land.
When you have forgotten Sunday halves in bed,
Or me sitting on the front-room radiator in the limping afternoon
Looking off down the long street
To nowhere,
Hugged by my plain old wrapper of no-expectation
And nothing-I-have-to-do and I'm-happy-why?
And if-Monday-never-had-to-come—
When you have forgotten that, I say,

And how you swore, if somebody beeped the bell,
And how my heart played hopscotch if the telephone rang;
And how we finally went in to Sunday dinner,
That is to say, went across the front room floor to the ink-spotted table in the
southwest corner
To Sunday dinner, which was always chicken and noodles
Or chicken and rice
And salad and rye bread and tea
And chocolate chip cookies—
I say, when you have forgotten that,
When you have forgotten my little presentiment
That the war would be over before they got to you;
And how we finally undressed and whipped out the light and flowed into bed,
And lay loose-limbed for a moment in the week-end
Bright bedclothes,
Then gently folded into each other—
When you have, I say, forgotten all that,
~~Then you may tell~~
Then you may tell, boldly bold Willie Boone.
Perhaps—who knows?—He tires of looking down.
~~It was once for one, Ma, on his way to Lincoln Cemetery~~
Sadie bore two babies
Those eyes are never lifted, Never straight.
He was like golden-brown lynx
Under her maiden name.
He was something as far as
With sand-waves loving her brow.
Maug. and Ma and Papa
He was lost without a hand to hold.
Nearly died of shame.
He was nothing but a
Every one but Sadie
Plain black boy.
Nearly died of shame.

It was Mabbie alone by the grammar school gates.

Yet chocolate companions had she:

When Sadie said her last so-long

Mabbie on Mabbie with hush in the heart.

Her girls struck out from home.

Swing low swing low sweet sweet chariot.

Mabbie on Mabbie to be

Sadie had left her a ragick

Nothing but a plain black boy.

Her father (a white comb.)

All done with seeing her fat little form

Burst out of the basement door;

And with seeing her African son-in-law

(Rightful heir to the throne)

With his great white strong cold squares of teeth

And his little eyes of stone;

And with seeing the squat fat daughter
Letting in the men
When majesty has gone for the day—
And letting them out again.

Maud, who went to college,

The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith

She is living all alone
Drive him past the Snow.
Inamoratas, with an approbation,
Blind within his casket,
Bestowed his title. Blessed his inclination.
But maybe he will know.

Down through Forty-seventh Street:

Negro Hero

Underneath the L,
He wakes, in wilds, elaborately: a cat

And—Northwest Corner, Prairie,
Tawny, reluctant, royal. He is fat

That he loved so well, into their teeth in order to save them.
And fine this morning. Definite. Reimbursed.

However I have heard that sometimes you have to deal

Devilishly with drowning men in order to swim them to shore.

Or they will haul themselves and you to the trash and the fish beneath.

(When I think of this, I do not worry about a few

Chipped teeth.)

Don't forget the Dance Halls—

Ballad of Pearl May Lee

He waits a moment, he designs his reign,
Where he picked his women, where
That no performance may be plain or vain.
Then off they took you, off to the jail,
Then good heavens, it is good I put gold on their name.
Then rises in a clear delirium.
A hundred hooting after.
Or there would have been spikes in the afterward hands.
And you should have heard me at my house.
But let us speak only of my success and the pictures in the Caucasian dailies
I cut my lungs with my laughter,
As well as the Negro weeklies. For I am a gem.

(They laugh not, concerned that it was hardly The Enemy my fight was against
But I laugh)er.

I cut my lungs with my laughter.

Born in Alabama.

Bred in Illinois.

He sheds, with his pajamas, shabby days.

He was nothing but a

And his desertedness, his intricate fear, the

They dragged you into a dusty cell,
It was dead time. And of course my blood was

Postponed resentments and the prim precautions.

And a rat was in the corner.

Boiling about in my head and straining and howling and singing me on.

And what was I doing? Laughing still.

Of course I was rolled on wheels of my boy itch to get at the gun.

Though never was a poor gal lerner,

Of ~~dooms~~ all the delicate rehearsal shots of my child-hood massed in mirage
Before me.

~~Of course I was a~~ poor gal lorn.

And my first swallow of the liquor of battle bleeding black air dying and demon
noise
Made me wild.

Swing low swing low sweet sweet chariot.

Nothing but a plain black boy.
Now, at his bath, would you deny him lavender

Or take away the power of his pine?
The sheriff, he peeped in through the bars.
It was kinder than that, though, and I showed like a banner my kindness.
What smelly substitute, heady as wine,
And (the red old thing) he told you
I loved. And a man will guard when he loves.
Would you provide? life must be aromatic.
You son of a bitch, you're going to hell!
Their white-gowned democracy was my fair lady.

~~Which you can be buying, sold, should be in the soft, some~~
~~But that you take, of the dear in his life? suggest~~
~~Aster? Really Good geranium?~~
~~Flower you wanted, would be responsible, a Show~~
~~With the held,ifies, formal chrysanthemum~~
 Magnificence, poinsettias, and emphatic
 Red of prize roses? might his happiest
 Alternative (you muse) be, after all,
 A bit of gentle garden in the best
 Of taste and straight tradition? Maybe so.
 But you forget, or did you ever know,
 His heritage of cabbage and pigtails,
 Old intimacy with alleys, garbage pails,
 Down in the deep (but always beautiful) South
 Where roses blush their blithest (it is said)
 And sweet magnolias put Chanel to shame.

No! He has not a flower to his name.

Except a feather one, for his lapel.
 But you paid for your white arms, Sammy boy,
 Still — am I good enough to die for them, is my blood bright enough to be
 Apart from that, if he should think of flowers
 And you didn't pay with money.
 spilled.
 It is in terms of dandelions or death.

Was paid with a black yarding man who boy,
Only a school tipset the white boy,
And they begin to kill him, do they wish me to kill
Rend him in my place say, from his lips and strides to them
Shake the white papers and tap them men,
For instance—certainly you might as well
Leave him his lotion, lavender and oil.

Let us proceed. Let us inspect, together
With his meticulous and serious love,
Oh, dig me out of my don't-despair.
In a southern city a white man said
The innards of this closet. Which is a vault
Pull me out of my poor-me.

~~Where, if I may be allowed to say,~~
~~Moles in the plating of the head all shine.~~
~~But surely to suit the hand of a fine~~
~~Shashty by the drape of a black coat~~
~~Xhuhapet. With a sure padding that is wide~~
And cocky and determined as his pride;
Ballooning pants that taper off to ends
Scheduled to choke precisely.

Here are hats
Like bright umbrellas; and hysterical ties
Like narrow banners for some gathering war.

People are so in need, in need of help.

People want so much that they do not know.
At school, your girls were the bright little girls.
Naturally, the important thing is, I helped to save them, them and a part of their

You didn't abide dark meat.

Yellow was too thick for their law into their teeth in order to do that for them.

Black for feeling white and settled in myself because I believe it was a good job,

Despite was possible for: that they might prefer the

Preservation of this world in all its sick dignity and their knives

To the continuation of their creed

And their lives.

Below the tinkling trade of little coins

The gold impulse not possible to show

~~On a green brownish night skins and beer byed,~~
And me in your black folks bed.
Often and often you cut me cold,
And often I wished you dead.
Often and often you cut me cold.
Often I wished you dead.

These kneaded limbs receive the kiss of silk.

Then they receive the brave and beautiful
Then a white girl passed you by one day,
Embrace of some of that equivocal wool.
And, the vixen, she gave you the wink.
He looks into his mirror, loves himself—
And your stomach got sick and your legs liquefied.
The neat curve here, the angularity
And you thought till you couldn't think.
That is appropriate at just its place;
You thought,
The technique of a variegated grace.
You thought,
You thought till you couldn't think.

Here is all his sculpture and his art

And all his architectural design.

I fancy you out on the fringe of town,

Perhaps you would prefer to this a fine

The moon an owl's eye minding;

Value of marble, complicated stone.

The sweet and thick of the cricket-belled dark,

Would have him think with horror of baroque,

The fire within you winding

Rococo. You forget and you forget.

Winding,

Winding

The fire within you winding.

He dances down the hotel steps that keep
Remnants of last night's high life and distress,
Say, she was white like milk, though, wasn't she?
As spat-out purchased kisses and spilled beer.
And her breasts were cups of cream.
He swallows sunshine with a secret yelp.
In the back of her Buick you drank your fill.
Passes to coffee and a roll or two.
Then she roused you out of your dream.
Has breakfasted.
In the back of her Buick you drank your fill.
Out. Sounds about him smear.
Then she roused you out of your dream.
Become a unit. He hears and does not hear
The alarm clock meddling in somebody's sleep;
Children's governed Sunday happiness;
The dry tone of a plane; a woman's oath;
Consumption's spiritless expectoration;
An indignant robin's resolute donation
Pinching a track through apathy and din;
Restaurant vendors weeping; and the L
That comes on like a slightly horrible thought.

Pictures, too, as usual, are blurred.

He sees and does not see the broken windows
"You raped me, nigger," she softly said.
Hiding their shame with newsprint; little girl
(The shame was threading through.)
With ribbons decking wornness, little boy
"You raped me, nigger, and what the hell
Wearing the trousers with the decentest patch,
Do you think I'm going to do?
To honor Sunday; women on their way
What the hell;
From "service," temperate holiness arranged
What the hell
Able on asking faces; men estranged
Do you think I'm going to do?
From music and from wonder and from joy
But far familiar with the guiding awe
Of foodlessness.

He loiters.

Restaurant vendors

Weep, or out of them rolls a restless glee.
The Lonesome Blues, the Long-lost Blues, I Want A
Big Fat Mama. Down these sore avenues
Comes no Saint-Saëns, no piquant elusive Grieg,
And not Tschaikovsky's wayward eloquence
And not the shapely tender drift of Brahms.
But could he love them? Since a man must bring
To music what his mother spanked him for
When he was two: bits of forgotten hate,
Devotion: whether or not his mattress hurts:
The little dream his father humored: the thing
His sister did for money: what he ate
For breakfast—and for dinner twenty years
Ago last autumn: all his skipped desserts.

The pasts of his ancestors lean against
Him. Crowd him. Fog out his identity.
I'll tell every white man in this town.
Hundreds of hungers mingle with his own,
I'll tell them all of my sorrow.
Hundreds of voices advise so dexterously
You got my body tonight, nigger boy.
He quite considers his reactions his,
I'll get your body tomorrow.
Judges he walks most powerfully alone,
Tomorrow.
That everything is—simply what it is.
Tomorrow.
I'll get your body tomorrow.”

But movie-time approaches, time to boo
The hero's kiss, and boo the heroine
And my glory but Sammy she did! She did!
Whose ivory and yellow it is sin,
And they stole you out of the jail.
For his eye to eat of, The Mickey Mouse,
They wrapped you around a cottonwood tree.
However, is for everyone in the house.
And they laughed when they heard you wail.

Laughed,

Laughed.

They laughed when they heard you wail.

Squires his lady to dinner at Joe's Eats.

His lady alters as to leg and eye,
And I was laughing, down at my house.
Thickness and height, such minor points as these,
Laughing fit to kill.

From Sunday to Sunday. But no matter what
You got what you wanted for dinner,
Her name or body positively she's
But brother you paid the bill.

In Queen Lace stockings with ambitious heels
Brother,
That strain to kiss the calves, and vivid shoes
Brother,

Frontless and backless, Chinese fingernails,
Brother you paid the bill.
Earrings, three layers of lipstick, intense hat

Dripping with the most voluble of veils.

Her affable extremes are like sweet bombs

About him, whom no middle grace or good

Could gratify. He had no education

In quiet arts of compromise. He would

Not understand your counsels on control, nor

Thank you for your late trouble.

At Joe's Eats

You get your fish or chicken on meat platters.
You paid for your dinner, Sammy boy,
With coleslaw, macaroni, candied sweets,
And you didn't pay with money.
Coffee and apple pie. You go out full,
You paid with your hide and my heart, Sammy boy,
(The end is—isn't it?—all that really matters.)
For your taste of pink and white honey,

Honey,

Honey.

For your taste of pink and white honey.

And even and intrepid come

The tender boots of night to home.
Oh, dig me out of my don't-despair.

Oh, pull me out of my poor-me.

Oh, get me a garment of red to wear.

You had it coming surely.

Surely.

Surely.

You had it coming surely.

*Her body is like new brown bread
Under the Woolworth mignonette.
Her body is a honey bowl
Whose waiting honey is deep and hot.
Her body is like summer earth,
Receptive, soft, and absolute . . .*

FROM **Gay Chaps at the Bar**

souvenir for Staff Sergeant Raymond Brooks and every other soldier

gay chaps at the bar

. . . and guys I knew in the States, young officers, return from the front crying and trembling. Gay chaps at the bar in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York. . . .

LIEUTENANT WILLIAM C
in the South

We ~~knew how to order. Just the dash~~ *still do I keep my look, my identity . . .*

Necessary. The length of gaiety in good taste.
Each body has its art, its precious prescribed
~~Whether the raillery should be slightly iced~~
Pose, that even in passion's droll contortions, waltzes,
And given green, or served up hot and lush,
Or push of pain—or when a grief has stabbed,
And we knew beautifully how to give to women
Or hatred hacked—is its, and nothing else's.
The summer spread, the tropics, of our love.
Each body has its pose. No other stock
When to persist, or hold a hunger off.
That is irrevocable, perpetual
Knew white speech. How to make a look an omen.
And its to keep. In castle or in shack.
But nothing ever taught us to be islands,
With rags or robes. Through good, nothing, or ill.
And smart, athletic language for this hour
And even in death a body, like no other
Was not in the curriculum. No stout
On any hill or plain or crawling cot
Lesson showed how to chat with death. We brought
Or gentle for the lilyless hasty pall
No brass fortissimo, among our talents,
(Having twisted, gagged, and then sweet-ceased bother),
To holler down the lions in this air.
Shows the old personal art, the look. Shows what
It showed at baseball. What it showed in school.

my dreams, my works, must wait till after hell

I hold my honey and I store my bread
In little jars and cabinets of my will.
I label clearly, and each latch and lid
I bid, Be firm till I return from hell.
I am very hungry. I am incomplete.
And none can tell when I may dine again.
No man can give me any word but Wait,
The puny light. I keep eyes pointed in;
Hoping that, when the devil days of my hurt
Drag out to their last dregs and I resume
On such legs as are left me, in such heart
As I can manage, remember to go home,
My taste will not have turned insensitive
To honey and bread old purity could love.

looking

You have no word for soldiers to enjoy
The feel of, as an apple, and to chew
With masculine satisfaction. Not “good-by!”
“Come back!” or “careful!” Look, and let him go.
“Good-by!” is brutal, and “come back!” the raw
Insistence of an idle desperation
Since could he favor he would favor now.
He will be “careful!” if he has permission.
Looking is better. At the dissolution
Grab greatly with the eye, crush in a steel
Of study—Even that is vain. Expression,
The touch or look or word, will little avail,
The brawniest will not beat back the storm
Nor the heaviest haul your little boy from harm.

mentors

For I am rightful fellow of their band.
My best allegiances are to the dead.
I swear to keep the dead upon my mind,
Disdain for all time to be overglad.
Among spring flowers, under summer trees,
By chilling autumn waters, in the frosts
Of supercilious winter—all my days
I'll have as mentors those reproving ghosts.
And at that cry, at that remotest whisper,
I'll stop my casual business. Leave the banquet.
Or leave the ball—reluctant to unclasp her
Who may be fragrant as the flower she wears,
Make gallant bows and dim excuses, then quit
Light for the midnight that is mine and theirs.

*the white troops had their orders
but the Negroes looked like men*

They had supposed their formula was fixed.
They had obeyed instructions to devise
A type of cold, a type of hooded gaze.
But when the Negroes came they were perplexed.
These Negroes looked like men. Besides, it taxed
Time and the temper to remember those
Congenital iniquities that cause
Disfavor of the darkness. Such as boxed
Their feelings properly, complete to tags—
A box for dark men and a box for Other—
Would often find the contents had been scrambled.
Or even switched. Who really gave two figs?
Neither the earth nor heaven ever trembled.
And there was nothing startling in the weather.

love note

I: surely

Surely you stay my certain own, you stay
My you. All honest, lofty as a cloud.
Surely I could come now and find you high,
As mine as you ever were; should not be awed.
Surely your word would pop as insolent
As always: “Why, of course I love you, dear.”
Your gaze, surely, ungauzed as I could want.
Your touches, that never were careful, what they were.
Surely—But I am very off from that.
From surely. From indeed. From the decent arrow
That was my clean naïveté and my faith.
This morning men deliver wounds and death.
They will deliver death and wounds tomorrow.
And I doubt all. You. Or a violet.

the progress

And still we wear our uniforms, follow
The cracked cry of the bugles, comb and brush
Our pride and prejudice, doctor the sallow
Initial ardor, wish to keep it fresh.
Still we applaud the President's voice and face.
Still we remark on patriotism, sing,
Salute the flag, thrill heavily, rejoice
For death of men who too saluted, sang.
But inward grows a soberness, an awe,
A fear, a deepening hollow through the cold.
For even if we come out standing up
How shall we smile, congratulate: and how
Settle in chairs? Listen, listen. The step
Of iron feet again. And again wild.

FROM
ANNIE ALLEN | 1949

Notes from the Childhood and the Girlhood

1 *the birth in a narrow room*

Weeps out of western country something new.
Blurred and stupendous. Wanted and unplanned.

Winks. Twines, and weakly winks
Upon the milk-glass fruit bowl, iron pot,
The bashful china child tipping forever
Yellow apron and spilling pretty cherries.

The Anniad

The Anniad Allen

Now, weeks and years will go before she thinks
Make of herself a laughing matter.
How pinchy is my room! how can I breathe!
Sister, dear little daughter
I am not anything and I have got
Who can the high gods look for star,
Not anything, or anything to do! —
Who ever the old gods have far;
But prances nevertheless with gods and fairies
Physician and able to eat
Birthely about the pump and then beneath
Har Quink on Oats and Corn-of-Wheat.
The elms and grapevines, then in darling endeavor
What tongue to turn and his foot the penny.
By privy foyer, where the screenings stand
For ear to hear the haven't-any,
And where the bugs buzz by in private cars
For arm to toss, for leg to chance,
Across old peach cans and old jelly jars.
For heart to hanker for romance.

Appendix to *The Anniad*

leaves from a loose leaf war diary
the parents people wife diary
What is Anne and Andrew's mother
1
("thousands—killed in action")
There was something else, something other.
Clogged and soft and sloppy eyes
Known to him, he was a little God
Have lost the light that bites or terrifies.
Westward, long and strange, unshod
You need to look a little among the vague
Fishes, the clever evasions of the vagueness
On flared one lit up in her foot
Above the healthy energy of decay.
And using the feather bed
You need the untranslatable ice to watch,
To put into her pocket book.
The purple and black to smell.
Or just a deep and human look,
She did not know; but tried to tell.

FROM **The Womanhood**

²
Heimlich of the Sunday chicken and well,
The Certainty we two shall meet by God
All lines moves not indeed ball
Where the horse is under a wig any more.
(Which though not married has a ring
One might expect to find in a sermon state
And who have children can be hard:
Because we two are worshippers of life,
Before your mother is older than discreet,
Being young, being masters of the long-legged stride,
Who shall pause in a sense and in no sense
Gypsy arm-swing. We never did learn how
And Mother in the kitchen to guard berry jam.
To find white in the Bible. We want nights
And you don't have to go to bed and remark,
Of vague adventure, lips lax wet and warm,
Why perish purely in the dark, spirits hence
Bees in the stomach, sweat across the brow. Now.
Not proper that I call you honey
To laugh or fail, diffident, wonder-starred.
While through a throttling dark we others hear
The little lifting helplessness, the queer
Whimper-whine; whose unridiculous
Lost softness softly makes a trap for us.
And makes a curse. And makes a sugar of
The malocclusions, the inconditions of love.

Watching for the paladin
 VI *old woman's ballad*
 the rules for Cousin Vit
 Which no woman ever had,
 Out of her, one speckle-gray happiness
 After the belly and bowel work, he was dead.
 They 250 things done, taintless light to war,
 Will be climbing in his tower and getting fed,
 What shall I give my children who are poor,
 And my thought that is in the head, fold her
 Who are all under the past wings of the grass,
 Ruralist and rather bad, the bolts before
 Who are my sweetest lepers, who demand
 Cosmopolitan and kind,
 No velvet and no velvety velvet,
 She rises in the sunshine. There she goes,
 But who have begged me for a brisk contour,
 Back to the bars she knew and the repose
 Crying that they are quasi, contraband untrue.
 In love rooms and the things in people's eyes
 Because unfinished, graven by a hand
 Too vital and too squeaking. Must emerge
 Less than angels, admirable or sure.
 Even now she does the snake-hips with a hiss.
 My hand is stuffed with mode, design, device.
 Stops the bad wine across her shantung, talks
 But I lack access to my proper stone. Change.
 Of pregnancy, guitars and bridgework, walks
 And prelude of pian shall not suffice.
 In parks or alleys, comes haply on the verge
 Nor grief nor love shall be enough alone
 Of happiness, haply hysterics. Is.
 To ratify my little halves who bear
 Across an autumn freezing everywhere.

Think of thaumaturgic lass

Looking in her looking glass //
Pleasant customs sit behind
With the women ordered how more strictly had
One white boy and one girl, who could dote
And the Negro clown came on the stage and doffed
His broken hat, her bushy hair, then the soft
Mites, come invade most frugal vestibules
So colorfully incorrect
Spectered with crusts of penitents' renewals
So amorous,
And all hysterics arrogant for a day.
So flatly brave!
Instruct yourselves here is no devil to pay.
Boothed-in, one can detect,
Children, confine your lights in jellied rules;
Dissect.
Resemble graves; be metaphysical mules;
Learn Lord will not distort nor leave the fray.
Behind the scurrings of your neat motif
I shall wait, if you wish: revise the psalm
If that should frighten you: sew up belief
If that should tear: turn, singularly calm

At forehead and at fingers rather wise,
Holding the bandage ready for your eyes.

And a man of tan engages
For the springtime of her pride,
Nor hate the handsome tiger, call him devil
She was bred here to swiss being rid
To man-feast, manifesting Sunday evil,
Gondolier, gentle, design the dance with hair,
On the shore of the river, what to expect.
Late Annie in her power lay, E. M. PRICE
And loud, the decked dismissal of his gift,
Not one was laying, she stuck her tongue out, slid.
Though sun was up and spinning,
The sagared foot and hauteur. Then the rift
But no sav, shinnent, the shipping string
The blush-brown shoulder was so bare,
With feathery isoteed, muzzle the note
Blush-brown lip was winning.
With hurting love; the music that they wrote
Bewitch, bewilder. Qualify to sing
Threadwise. Devise no salt, no hempen thing
For the dear instrument to bear. Devote
The bow to silks and honey. Be remote
A while from malice and from murdering.
But first to arms, to armor. Carry hate
In front of you and harmony behind.
Be deaf to music and to beauty blind.

Win war. Rise bloody, maybe not too late
For having first to civilize a space
Wherein to play your violin with grace.

Narrow master master-calls;

And the godhead glitters now

Since for a week she must not play "Charmaine"
When this is thrown out the flowers
When she is not to be seen or heard, or left at ditty—
But then shrieked the mother dear,
"Be it to fetch and carry?"
And joined to person and place
Get a broom to whisk the doors
Which my dear wife the festive colored brightness
Of her own bright smiles, and spites that began
Or get a man to marry
Before it was over and all.
Enchanted, a macabre mockery

Charming the rainbow radiance into tightness

And into a remarkable politeness

That is not kind and does not want to be,

May not they in the crisp encounter see

Something to recognize and read as rightness?

I say they may, so granitely discreet,

The little crooked questionings inbound,

By the light heat, the lazy upward whine
 And lazy creaky downward drawl of “Tanya.”
 Are dead with the nail in the nail.
 And their interiors sweat.
 They lean back in the half-light, stab their stares
 At: walls, panels of imitation oak
 With would-be marbly look; linoleum squares
 Of dusty rose and brown with little white splashes,

When they flow, sweet, then to their fountains
 The advances Sovereign, whom I raise my shades before,
 Red as the blood of Ophion, and as fast with pride
 Norsting, as you, as I, in shame gone hollow,
 Norsting, as you, as I, in shame gone hollow,

Pity the giants wallowing on the plain.
Giants who bleat and chafe in their small grass,
Seldom to spread the palm; to spit; come clean.

Which she makes a chapel of.
Where she genuflects to love.
All the prayerbooks in her eyes
While down stairs that woman in the male phonograph bleats, "Knock me a kiss."
Open soft as sacrifice
One is not certain if or why or how, in the sweatingest physical manner
Even when one has taken the stick in the ear,
Open my roams, let the light and air.
Open my roams, let the light and air.
Open my roams, let the light and air.
Reserve my service at the human feast.
Was merely to avoid the bottle, to not bleed.
And let the joy continue. Do not hoard silence
For the moment when I enter, tardily,
For knowing you roam like a gold half god
Love joy my present, a pool you, And to love you
And your golden promise was gay,
No more as a woman loves a drunken man,
Reached no Alps: or knows no Alps to reach.
Restraining full caress and good My Dear,
Even pity for the heaviness and the need—
Fearing sudden fire out of the uncaring mouth,

Boiling in the slack eyes, and the traditional blow.
Next, the indifference formal, deep and slow.

Silver flowers fill the eves
Of the metamorphosis.

And her set excess believes

Now, this is "The Thing All Say Is the Biggest Floor," immediately cease to be. And
inconspicuously, no
But on your rubbers and you won't catch cold.
Silver has to sap all day, and we can't be kinder than ours.
Comes in your graceful glider and benign,
Signed and directed heaven: Go to Sunday School.
Be sure to make them of they never! Reason's air is white.
To smile upon me bigly; now desires
Bad dreams, in meanness and goodness more (with cool
Sudden where? in bloom on your overcoat the expensive flowers! . . .)
Me easy, easy, claims the days are softer
Strong balm to calm the burning at the brain?)—
And the others mind what you say
Than they were; murmurs reflectively "Remember
Behold,
Ill-knowing your route rides to me, roundabout.
When cruelty, metal, public, uncomplex
Love's true, and triumphs; and God's actual.
For promise so golden and gay.
Trampled you obviously and every hour. . . ."

(Now cruelty flaunts diplomas, is elite,
Delicate, has polish, knows how to be discreet):

Requests my patience, wills me to be calm,
Brings me a chair, but the one with broken straw,
Whispers "My friend, no thing is without flaw.
If prejudice is native—and it is—you
Will find it ineradicable—not to
Be juggled, not to be altered at all,
But left unvexed at its place in the properness
Of things, even to be given (with grudging) honor.

What

We are to hope is that intelligence
Can sugar up our prejudice with politeness.
Politeness will take care of what needs caring.
For the line is there.
And has a meaning. So our fathers said—
And they were wise—we think—At any rate,
They were older than ourselves. And the report is
What's old is wise. At any rate, the line is

Long and electric. Lean beyond and nod.
Doomer, though, crescendo-comes
Be sprightly. Wave. Extend your hand and teeth.
Prophesying hecatombs.
But never forget it stretches there beneath."
Surrealist and cynical.
The toys are all grotesque
And not for lovely hands; are dangerous.
Spirals upon the silver leaves.
Serrate in open and artful places. Rise.
Let us combine. There are no magics or elves
Against dismay, and counterspunged, harked,
Or timely godmothers to guide us. We are lost, must
Readying for riding my way.
Wizard a track through our own screaming weed.
You kiss all the great-lipped girls that you can.

If only they knew that it's little today
And nothing tomorrow to take or to pay,
For sake of a promise so golden, gay,

For promise so golden and gay.”

Names him. Tames him. Takes him off,
Throws to columns row on row.
Where he makes the rifles cough,
~~This only west people will not “do look” and look~~
~~Stutter. Where the revenue~~
At their wood and brick and stone
Is staccato majesty.
~~Wild moon and sun. And like~~
~~Then to marches. Then to know~~
~~A flying furniture, or bird with lattice wing; or gaunt thing, a-stammer down a~~
~~The hunched heels across the sea.~~
nightmare neon peopled with condor, hawk and shrike.

Vaunting hands are now devoid.

Hieroglyphics of her eyes

Blink upon a paradise

When do most people arrive here? Paralyzed and paranoid.

But this Express Splatter, well, I think we have not enough.

To say yes is to die

The same result is to die
without one's dish and crockery with no clatter,
Climax & Skirmishes can do.

And not a little. The dead wear capably their wry, wrinkled noses as if to say, "I'm not here, but I'll be back in a little gruff."

Less than ruggedly he kindles
Pallors into broken fire.
Hies him home, the bumps and brindles
Of his rummage of desire
Tosses to her lap entire.
Enameled emblems. They smell.
Hearing still such eerie stutter.
But that and that they do not altogether yell is all that we know well.
Caring not if candles gutter.

Tan man twitches: for for long
Life was little as a sand,
Little as an inch of song,
Little as the aching hand
That would fashion mountains, such
It is brave to be involved,
Little as a drop from grand
To be not fearful to be unresolved,,
When a heart decides "Too much!" —

Yet there was a drama, drought
Scarleted about the brim
Not with blood alone for him,
Flood, with blossom in between
Retch and wheeling and cold shout,
Her new wish was to smile
Suffocation, with a green
When answers took no airships, walked a while.
Moist sweet breath for mezzanine.

Hometown hums with stoppages.
Now the doughty meanings die
As costumery from streets.
And this white and greater chess
Baffles tan man. Gone the heats
That observe the funny fly
Till the stickum stops the cry.

With his helmet's final doff
Soldier lifts his power off.
Soldier bare and chilly then
Wants his power back again.
No confection languider
Before quick-feast quick-famish Men
Than the candy crowns-that-were.

Hunts a further fervor now.
Shudders for his impotence.
Chases root and vehemence,
Chases stilts and straps to vie
With recession of the sky.
Stiffens: yellows: wonders how
Woman fits for recompense.

Not that woman! (Not that room!
Not that dusted demi-gloom!)
Nothing limpid, nothing meek.
But a gorgeous and gold shriek
With her tongue tucked in her cheek,
Hissing gauzes in her gaze,

Coiling oil upon her ways.

Gets a maple banshee. Gets
A sleek slit-eyed gypsy moan.
Oh those violent vinaigrettes!
Oh bad honey that can hone
Oilily the bluntest stone!

Oh mad bacchanalian lass
That his random passion has!

Think of sweet and chocolate
Minus passing-magistrate,
Minus passing-lofty light,
Minus passing-stars for night,
Sirocco wafts and tra la la,

Minus symbol, cinema

Mirages, all things suave and bright.

Seeks for solaces in snow

In the crusted wintertime.

Icy jewels glint and glow.

Half-blue shadows slanting grow

Over blue and silver rime.
And the crunching in the crust
Chills her nicely, as it must.

Seeks for solaces in green
In the green and fluting spring.
Bubbles apple-green, shrill wine,

Hyacinthine devils sing
In the upper air, unseen
Pucks and cupids make a fine
Fume of fondness and sunshine.

Runs to summer gourmet fare.
Heavy and inert the heat,
Braided round by ropes of scent

With a hypnotist intent.
Think of chocolate and sweet
Wanting richly not to care
That summer hoots at solitaire.

Runs to parks. November leaves
All gone papery and brown

Poise upon the queasy stalks
And perturb the respectable walks.
Glances grayly and perceives
This November her true town:
All's a falling falling down.

Spins, and stretches out to friends.

Cries "I am bedecked with love!"
Cries "I am philanthropist!"
Take such rubies as ye list.
Suit to any bonny ends.
Sheathe, expose: but never shove.
Prune, curb, mute: but put above."

Sends down flirting bijouterie.

“Come, oh populace, to me!”
It winks only, and in that light
Are the copies of all her bright
Copies. Glass begets glass. No
Populace goes as they go
Who can need it but at night.

Twists to Plato, Aeschylus,
Seneca and Mimnermus,
Pliny, Dionysius. . . .

Who remove from remarkable hosts
Of agonized and friendly ghosts,
Lean and laugh at one who looks
To find kisses pressed in books.

Tests forbidden taffeta.
Meteors encircle her.
Little lady who lost her twill,
Little lady who lost her fur
Shivers in her thin hurrah,
Pirouettes to pleasant shrill
Appoggiatura with a skill.

But the culprit magics fade.
Stoical the retrograde.
And no music plays at all
In the inner, hasty hall
Which compulsion cut from shade.—
Frees her lover. Drops her hands.
Shorn and taciturn she stands.

Petals at her breast and knee. . . .

“Then incline to children-dear!

Pull the halt magnificence near,

Sniff the perfumes, ribbonize

Gay bouquet most satinly;

Hoard it, for a planned surprise

When the desert terrifies.”

Perfumes fly before the gust,
Colors shrivel in the dust,
And the petal velvet shies,
When the desert terrifies:
Howls, revolves, and countercharms:
Shakes its great and gritty arms:
And perplexes with odd eyes.

Hence from scenic bacchanal,
Preshrunk and droll prodigal!
Smallness that you had to spend,
Spent. Wench, whiskey and tail-end
Of your overseas disease
Rot and rout you by degrees.
—Close your fables and fatigues;

Kill that fanged flamingo foam
And the fictive gold that mocks;
Shut your rhetorics in a box;
Pack compunction and go home.
Skeleton, settle, down in bed.
Slide a bone beneath Her head,
Kiss Her eyes so rash and red.

Pursing lips for new good-byeing
Now she folds his rust and cough
In the pity old and staunch.
She remarks his feathers off;
Feathers for such tipsy flying
As this scarcely may re-launch
That is dolesome and is dying.

He leaves bouncy sprouts to store
Caramel dolls a little while,
Then forget him, larger doll
Who would hardly ever loll,
Who would hardly ever smile,
Or bring dill pickles, or core
Fruit, or put salve on a sore.

Leaves his mistress to dismiss
Memories of his kick and kiss,
Grant her lips another smear,
Adjust the posies at her ear,
Quaff an extra pint of beer,
Cross her legs upon the stool,
Slit her eyes and find her fool.

Leaves his devotee to bear
Weight of passing by his chair
And his tavern. Telephone
Hoists her stomach to the air.
Who is starch or who is stone
Washes coffee-cups and hair,
Sweeps, determines what to wear.

In the indignant dark there ride
Roughnesses and spiny things
On infallible hundred heels.
And a bodiless bee stings.
Cyclone concentration reels.
Harried sods dilate, divide,
Suck her sorrowfully inside.

Think of tweaked and twenty-four.
Fuchsias gone or gripped or gray,
All hay-colored that was green.
Soft aesthetic looted, lean.
Crouching low, behind a screen,
Pock-marked eye-light, and the sore
Eaglets of old pride and prey.

Think of almost thoroughly
Derelict and dim and done.
Stroking swallows from the sweat.
Fingering faint violet.
Hugging old and Sunday sun.
Kissing in her kitchenette
The minuets of memory.

FROM

THE BEAN EATERS | 1960

Strong Men, Riding Horses

Lester After the Western

Strong Men, riding horses. In the West
On a range five hundred miles. A Thousand. Reaching
From dawn to sunset. Rested blue to orange.
From hope to crying. Except that Strong Men are
Desert-eyed. Except that Strong Men are
Pasted to stars already. Have their cars
Beneath them. Rentless, too. Too broad of chest
To shrink when the Rough Man hails. Too flailing
To redirect the Challenger, when the challenge
Nicks; slams; buttonholes. Too saddled.

The Bean Eaters

They eat beans mostly, this old yellow pair.
I am not like that. I pay rent, am addled
Dinner is a casual affair.
By illegible landlords, run, if robbers call.
Plain chipware on a plain and creaking wood,
Tin flatware.

We Real Cool

~~The Bowlers are Mostly Good.~~
~~What mannerisms I present, employ,~~
~~Seven at the Golden Shovel.~~
Two who have lived their day,
Are camouflage, and what my mouths remark
But keep on putting on their clothes
To word-wall off that broadness of the dark
And school wings away.
Is pitiful.

I am not brave at all.

Old Mary

And remembering . . .

Remembering, with twinklings and twinges,
My last defense

As they lean over the beans in their rented back room that is full of beads and
Is the present tense.

Strike signs and Wells and cloths, tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes.

A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon

Mississippi, she how to know
Sing sin. We
I shall not go
From the first it had been like a

Ballad. It had the beat inevitable. It had the blood.

A wildness cut up, and tied in little bunches,

Like the four-line stanzas of the ballads she had never quite

Understood—the ballads they had set her to, in school.

The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till

Cathedral-hunting in Spain
Nor cherrying in Michigan or Maine.
Here the milk-white maid, the “maid mild”
Die soon.
After the Burial
Of the ballad. Pursued

By the Dark Villain. Rescued by the Fine Prince.

The Happiness pulled taffy.

That was word nothing.

It was going to be a “maid mild.”

That kiss he killed her fast.

And she is sorry.

Chaos in windy grays

through a red prairie.

The Chicago *Defender* Sends a Man to Little Rock

Her bacon burned. She

Fall, 1957

Hastened to hide it in the step-on can, and

Drew more strips from the meat case. The eggs and sour-milk biscuits
In Little Rock the people bear

Did well. She set out a jar

Babes, and comb and part their hair

Of her new quince preserve.

And watch the want ads, put repair

To roof and latch. While wheat toast burns

A woman waters multiferns.

The Lovers of the Poor

... But there was a something about the matter of the Dark Villain.

He should have been older, perhaps,
Arrive! The Ladies from the Ladies' Betterment League

The hacking down of a villain was more fun to think about
Time upholds or overturns late light slanting

When his menace possessed undisputed breadth, undisputed height,
The many, tight, and small concerns.

On a hard, kind of vice with mercy and murder hinting

And best of all when his history was cluttered,
Here, there, interrupting, all deep and debonair,

With the bones of many eaten knights and princesses.

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 Crazy Woman
The furious madmen then all but nullified
The noxious needy ones whose battle's bald
When the Dark Villain was a blackish child
Nonetheless for being voiceless, hits one down.
I shall not sing a May song
Of fourteen, with eyes still too young to be dirty.
In Little Rock she had been singing
A May song should be gay
And a mouth too young to have lost every reminder
Of its infant softness
I'd wait until November
To sing a song of gray.
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-
That boy must have been surprised! For
At lovely love—up, haggard, to-be-hurt.
These were grown-ups. Grown-ups were supposed to be wise.
Lill Their League is allotting largesse to the Lost.
And the Fine Prince—and that other—so tall, so broad, so
And after testament and tunes,
But to put them clean their pretty money, to put
Grown—perhaps the boy had never guessed
Some solemn Sunday afternoons
His money collected from delicate rose-fingers,
I had the trouble with grown-ups was that under the magnificent shell of
Whose mouth and in her other ones thought
And any most formidable flawless rose-nails seems . . .
—adultood, just under,
To cheapen hyacinth darkness that we sought
They own Spode, Lowestoft, candelabra,
Waited the baby full of tantrums.
And played we found, rot, make the petals fall,
Mantels, and hostess gowns, and sunburst clocks,
It occurred to her that there may have been something
Let it be stairways, and a splintery box,
Turtle soup, Chippendale, red satin hangings,"
Ridiculous in the picture of the Fine Prince
Where you have thrown me, scraped me with your kiss,
Rushions and flatter Carnegie. They: winter
Rushing (rich with the breadth and height and
Have honed me, have released me after this
In Palm Beach, cross the water in June, attend,
Mature solidness whose lack, in the Dark Villain, was impressing her,
Cavern kindness, smiled away our shocks.
When suitable, the nice Art Institute
Confronting her more and more as this first day after the trial
That is the birthright of our lovely love
Buy the right books in the best bindings; saunter
And acquittal wore on) rushing
In swaddling clothes. Not like that Other one
On Michigan, Easter mornings, in sun or wind.

In a tasteless way, of course—across the dull dare,
The semi-assault of that extraordinary blackness.
The slackness
Of that light pink mouth told little. The eyes told of heavy care. . . .
But that was neither here nor there,
And nothing to a wage-paying mistress as should
Be getting her due whether life had been good
For her slave, or bad.
There it stood
In the door. They had never had
One in the house before.

He sat down, the Fine Prince, and
Began buttering a biscuit. He looked at his hands.

Bessie of Bronzeville Visits Mary and Norman at a Beach-house in New Buffalo

That hotness in July . . . the uniformed figures raw and implacable
More papers were in from the North, he mumbled. More meddling headlines.
And not intellectual.
You said, "Now take your shoes off," while what played
With their pepper-words, "bestiality," and "barbarism," and
Battling the hotness of clawing the suffering dust.
Wasn't the back town boogie but a green
Her Osceola child kissed by the black maid square on the mouth!
His Greenie stuff above the wide and clean
We half sneers he had mastered for the trial worked across
Wasn't the back town boogie but a green
Said, "and my hand laughed!" Nomsie.
His Sweetie and Betty Jack knocked her down to lean
Toes urged the slab to amber foam.
To tell them what to mean.
The dear man had "gone berserk"

And short work—

With a hammer—had been made
Of this daughter and her nights and days.
The Irishwoman (underpaid,
Mrs. Miles remembered with smiles),
Who was a perfect jewel, a red-faced trump,
A good old sort, a baker
Of rum cake, a maker
Of Mustard, would never return.
Mrs. Miles had begged the bewitched woman
To finish, at least, the biscuit blending,
To tarry till the curry was done,
To show some concern
For the burning soup, to attend to the tending
Of the tossed salad. “Inhuman,”
Patsy Houlihan had called Mrs. Miles.
“Inhuman.” And “a fool.”
And “a cool
One.”

The Alert Agency had leafed through its files—
What he'd like to do, he explained, was kill them all.
On short notice could offer
The time lost. The unwanted fame.
Only this dusky duffer
Still, it had been fun to show those intruders
There is love, too, in Little Rock. Soft women softly
The Ballad of Rudolph Reed
A thing or two. To show that snappy-eyed mother,
Opening themselves in kindness,
That sassy, Northern, brown-black—
Rudolph Reed was sabbleness,
And I was hurt by cider in the air.
Awaiting one's pleasure
And what the fake-wash did was dizzying.
Quotations, of course, from baby books were great
And that two good girls and his good little maid
I thought of England, as I watched you bring
Ready armor (but her animal distress
Grown and as she rose at the foot. . . .
The speckled pebbles,
Wore too and under a subtler metal dress,
The smooth quartz, I thought of Italy.
Inheritance of approximately hate).
They re-teach purple and unsullen blue.
Say baby shrieked to see his finger bleed,
The wispy sons go. And uncertain

Washed things have been clarified to a sleek kind
Of unintimate love, a love more of the mind
To order the nebulousness of that need.
—This was the way to put it, this the relief.
This sprayed a honey upon marvelous grime.
This told it possible to postpone the reef.
Fashioned a huggable darling out of crime.
Made monster personable in personal sight
By cracking mirrors down the personal night.
Disgust crawled through her as she chased the theme.
She, quite supposing purity despoiled,
Committed to sourness, disordered, soiled,
Went in to pry the ordure from the cream.
Cooing, “Come.” (Come out of the cannibal wilderness,
Dirt, dark, into the sun and bloomful air.
Return to freshness of your right world, wear
Sweetness again. Be done with beast, duress.)

Nothing could stop Mississippi.

He knew that. Big Fella

Knew that.

In Little Rock they know

And, what was so good, Mississippi knew that.

The Egg Boiler The telephone is a way of rejecting life,

Nothing and nothing could stop Mississippi.

Italy and England come to be bothered, is our business

Baby could send in their petitions and scold.

Keep it up and start to sing to me

Childhooders with their placid headlines: Their governors

But hungry hungry for a mouse-ted fuzziness. And me,

Could do as in Washington should,

Where at night a man in bed

With rich-eyed passion, and with straining heart.

We fools we cut him poems out of air.

Conscious of kindness, easy creature bond.

Night owl had which hardly and rapidly respond.
And sometimes weightlessness is much to bear.
You mock it, though, you name it Not Enough.
The egg, spooned gently to the avid pan,
And left the strict three minutes, or the four,
Is your Enough and art for any man.
We fools give courteous ear—then cut some more,
Shaping a gorgeous Nothingness from cloud.
You watch us, eat your egg, and laugh aloud.

“What I want,” the older baby said, “is ’lasses on my jam.”

Whereupon the younger baby

Picked up the molasses pitcher and threw,
I scratch my head, massage the hate-I-had.

The molasses in his brother’s face. Instantly
I blink across my prim and pencilled pad.

The Fine Prince leaned across the table and slapped
“May I never hear the plaster not down.”

The small and smiling criminal
Because the pain, a puzzle in this town.

Heat at the hairline, heat between the bowels,
May I never hear the roaches are

Examining, seeming, coarse, unnatural scene,
Falling like fat rain.

She saw all things except herself serene:
“They are like people everywhere.”

Child, big black woman, pretty kitchen towels.

She did not speak. When the Hand
Came down and away, and she could look at her child,
~~At her baby-child,~~
The angry Editor would reply
She could think only of blood.
In hundred harryings of Why.
Surely her baby's cheek
"Where never wife and children need
Had disappeared, and in its place, surely,
Go blinking through the gloom.
Hung a heaviness, a lengthening red, a red that had no end.
Where every room of many rooms
She shook her head. It was not true, of course.
Will be full of room.
It was not true at all. The

Child's face was as always, the
Color of the paste in her paste-jar.

She left the table, to the tune of the children's lamentations, which were shriller
Than ever. She

Looked out of a window. She said not a word. *That*
And true, they are hurling spittle, rock,
Was one of the new Somethings—
Garbage and fruit in Little Rock.

The fear,
On my home may have its east or west
Tying her as with iron,
On north or south behind it, a scythe

Of men harassing brownish girls.

(The bows and barrettes in the curls
And long for it when I find it.

And braids declined away from joy.)

Suddenly she felt his hands upon her. He had followed her
To the window. The children were whimpering now.

Such bits of tots. And she, their mother,
I saw a bleeding brownish boy. . . .
Could not protect them. She looked at her shoulders, still

Gripped in the claim of his hands. She tried, but could not resist the idea
It was in a street of bitter white
That a red ooze was seeping, spreading darkly, thickly, slowly,
That he made his application.
Over her white shoulders, her own shoulders,
For Rudolph Reed was oakener
And over all of Earth and Mars.

Than others in the nation.

He whispered something to her, did the Fine Prince, something
About love, something about love and night and intention.

The lariat lynch-wish I deplored.

The agent's steep and steady stare
Corroded to a grin.

Why, you black old, tough old hell of a man,

Move your family in!

She heard no hoof-beat of the horse and saw no flash of the shining steel.

The loveliest lynchee was our Lord.

Nary a grin grinned Rudolph Reed,
Nary a curse cursed he,

But moved in his House. With his dark little wife,
And his dark little children three.

He pulled her face around to meet
His, and there it was, close close,
For the first time in all those days and nights.
His mouth, wet and red,
So very, very, very red,
A neighbor would *look*, with a yawning eye
Closed over hers.

That squeezed into a slit.
But the Rudolph Reeds and the children three
Were too joyous to notice it.

Then a sickness heaved within her. The courtroom Coca-Cola,
The courtroom beer and hate and sweat and drone,
Pushed like a wall against her. She wanted to bear it.
But his mouth would not go away and neither would the
Decapitated exclamation points in that Other Woman's eyes.
For were they not firm in a home of their own

With windows everywhere
And a beautiful banistered stair
And a front yard for flowers and a back yard for grass?

She did not scream.
She stood there.
But a hatred for him burst into glorious flower,
And its perfume enclasped them—big,
Bigger than all magnolias.

The first night, a rock, big as two fists.
The second, a rock big as three.
But nary a curse cursed Rudolph Reed.
(Though oaken as man could be.)

The last bleak news of the ballad.
The rest of the rugged music.
The last quatrain.

The third night, a silvery ring of glass.

Patience ached to endure.

But he looked, and lo! small Mabel's blood

Was staining her gaze so pure.

Then up did rise our Rudolph Reed
And pressed the hand of his wife,
And went to the door with a thirty-four
And a beastly butcher knife.

He ran like a mad thing into the night.
And the words in his mouth were stinking.
By the time he had hurt his first white man
He was no longer thinking.

By the time he had hurt his fourth white man
Rudolph Reed was dead.
His neighbors gathered and kicked his corpse.
“Nigger—” his neighbors said.

Small Mabel whimpered all night long,
For calling herself the cause.
Her oak-eyed mother did no thing
But change the bloody gauze.

A Catch of Shy Fish

garbageman: the man with the orderly mind

What do you think of us in fuzzy endeavor, you whose directions are sterling,
whose lunge is straight?

Can you make a reason, how can you pardon us who memorize the rules and
never score?

Who memorize the rules from your own text but never quite transfer them to the
game,

Who never quite receive the whistling ball, who gawk, begin to absorb the
crowd's own roar.

sick man looks at flowers

Is earnestness enough, may earnestness attract or lead to light;

You are sick and old, and there is a closing in—

Is light enough, if hands in clumsy frenzy, filmsy whimsicality, enlist;

The eyes gone dead to all that would beguile

Is light enough when this bewilderment crying against the dark shuts down the
shades?

Dilute confusion. Find and explode our mist.

old people working (garden, car)

Echoes are dull and the body accepts no touch

Old people working. Making a gift of garden.
Except its pain. Mind is a little Isle.

Or washing a car, so some one else may ride.

A note of alliance, an eloquence of pride.

A way of greeting or sally to the world.

But now ~~invades~~ *weaponed woman* this impudence of red!
This ripe rebuke, this burgeoning affluence
Well, life has been a baffled vehicle
Mocks me and mocks the desert of my bed.
And baffling. But she fights, and
Has fought, according to her lights and
The lenience of her whirling-place.

old tennis player

She fights with semi-folded arms,
Refuses
Her strong bag, and the stiff
To refuse the racket, to mutter No to the net,
Frost of her face (that challenges "When" and "If.")
He leans to life, conspires to give and get
And altogether she does Rather Well.
Other serving yet.

a surrealist and Omega

Omega ran to witness him; beseeched;
Brought caution and carnality and cash.
She sauced him brownly, eating him
Under her fancy's finest Worcestershire.

Spaulding and François

He zigzagged.

There are cloudlets and things of cool silver in our dream, there are all of the
He was a knotted hiss.

Things Ethereal.
He was an insane hash

There is a
Of rebellious small strengths

Scent of wind cut with pine, a noise of
And soft-mouthed mumbling weakness.

Wind tangled among bells. There is spiritual laughter

Too hushed to be gay, too high: the happiness

Of angels. And there are angels' eyes, soft,

Heavy with precious compulsion.

The *Big Bessie* throws her son into the street
The art
But the People
Would not come right. That smear,
A day of sunny face and temper,
Will not let us alone; will not credit, condone
That yellow in the gray corner—
The winter trees
Art-loves that shun
That was not right, he had not reached
Are musical.
Them (moderate Christians rotting in the sun.)
The right, the careless hailed-out bleakness.

A god, a child.

He said he was most seriously amiss.
Bright lameness from my beautiful disease,

You have your destiny to chip and eat.

She had no purple or pearl to hang

About the neck of one a-wild.
Be precise.

With something better than candles in the eyes.

(Candles are not enough.)

A bantam beauty

Loving his ownhood for all it was worth.
At the root of the will, a wild inflammable stuff.

New pioneer of days and ways, be gone.

Hunt out your own or make your own alone.

Go down the street.

FROM
IN THE MECCA | 1968

FROM **AFTER MECCA**

Boy Breaking Glass

*To Marc Crawford
from whom the commission*

Whose broken window is a cry of art
(success, that winks aware
as elegance, as a treasonable faith)
is raw: is sonic: is old-eyed première.
Our beautiful flaw and terrible ornament.
Our barbarous and metal little man.

Medgar Evers

For Charles Evers

“I shall create! If not a note, a hole.
The man whose height his fear improved he
If not an overture, a desecration.”
arranged to fear no further. The raw
intoxicated time was time for better birth or
a final death.

Malcolm X

For Dudley Randall

Full of pepper and light
Old styles, old tempos, all the engagement of
Old Sals and night and cargoes,
the day—the sedate, the regulated fray—
Ragged-round,
the antique light, the Moral rose, old gusts,
Rich-robust,
tight whistlings from the past, the mothballs
in the Love at last our man forswore.

Two Dedications

“Don’t go down the plank
Medgar Evers annoyed confetti and assorted
He had the hero’s man’s vision.
Brands of businessmen’s eyes.
We gazed. We saw the maleness.

His maleness and fight were made
This maleness and fight were made

“Mayor Daley tugged a white ribbon, loosing the blue percale wrap. A hearty cheer went up as the cover
shipped off the big steel sculpture that looks at once like a bird and a woman.”

Nothing was there, and now I am no longer there.”

—Chicago *Sun-1*

The Blackstone Rangers

The only sanity is a cup of tea.
The shows came down: to maxims and surprise.

And in a soft and fundamental hour
And palsy.

II. At the Wall Disciplines
a sorcery devout and vertical

August 27, 1967
Began they new world.

(Seiji Ozawa leads the Symphony.
Thirty at the corner.

The Mayor smiles.

Black, raw, ready.
The side wall of a typical slum building on the corner of 43rd and Langley became a mural communic

And 50,000 See.)
Sores in the city.

that do not want to heal.

—E

Each one other
The sermon on the Warpland
He opened different weather
learned across tomorrow. People said that
is his ultimate reality."
he was holding clean globes in his hands.
— Ron Karenga

Does Gene Love Art? And Stop Art, but squirms.
The human arturges in byages —
A drumdrumdrum.
Hardly he expects stay that down thing
Humbly we come.
the not been ready.
South of success and east of gloss and glass are
the thinnest some things And hardly
sandals;
weatily or sniff, or scratch.
flowercloth;
And how Belafonte, King,
grave hoops of wood or gold, pendant
Black Jesus, Stokely, Malcolm X or Rap.
from black ears, brown ears, reddish-brown
Bungled trophies.
and ivory ears;
Their country is a Nation on no map.

“It was you, it was you who threw away my name!

The Second Sermon on the Warpland

And several strengths from drowsiness campaigned

For Walter Bradford

but spoke in Single Sermon on the warpland.

III *Gang Girls*
Buff, we must look ourselves and style ourselves for Art, who

A Rangerette
is the passionate one.

This is the urgency: Live!

black boy-men,

My exulting night exotics

and have your blooming in the noise of the whirlwind.

Black
We do detailed the M, the d, the

boy-men on roofs fist out “Black Power!” Val,

uses the nutrients of her orient,

a little black stampede

may cancel or add images whose Concerts

are as building, fountain, or the different trick.

Beyond the Ranger Inn or Cottage Grove.

images of brass and flowerswirl,

(Bowerly Boys, Disciples, pagan argument;

fists out “Black Power!”—tightens pretty eyes,

trassions of the night, stop no savory sanctities.)

leans back on mothercountry and is tract,

is treatise through her perfect and tight teeth.

Who has not Congress, lobster, love, luau,
the Regency Room, the Statue of Liberty,
And went about the warpland saying No.
runs. A sloppy amalgamation.
My people, black and black, revile the River.
A mistake.
Say that the River turns, and turn the River.
Observed and could not answer
A cliff.
(which is as in front of one) a redilfuse
A hymn: a share, and an exceeding sun.
Women in wool: hair chant their poetry.
Mary to wage in the sun, angles as many
Phil Cohran gives us messages and music
on the lowing and the grasshopper, on monstrous hand,
and rose in the upskied grasshopper,
made of developed bone and polished and honed cult.
solely the flawed humanity,
It is the Hour of tribe and of vibration,
prop a malign or failing light—
the day-long Hour. It is the Hour
but know the whirlwind is our commonwealth.
of ringing, rouse, of ferment-festival.
Not the easy man, who rides above them all,
not the jumbo brigand,
not the pet bird of poets, that sweetest sonnet,
shall straddle the whirlwind.

Nevertheless, live.

Say that our Something in doublepod contains
seeds for the coming hell and health together.
Prepare to meet
(sisters, brothers) the brash and terrible weather;

On Fairy; third and Langley
Mary's
And about the collapse of
Februarys shudder and are gone. Aprils
lilac hurries on. The stuff of the hulk—
fret frankly, lilac hurries on.
Summer is a hard irregular ridge.
October looks away.
And that's the Year!
Define and
Save for her bugle-love.
medicate the whirlwind.
Save for the bleat of not-obese devotion.

Save for Somebody Terribly Dying, under
the philanthropy of robins. Save for her Ranger
bringing
an amount of rainbow in a string-drawn bag.
“Where did you get the diamond?” Do not ask:
but swallow, straight, the spirals of his flask
and assist him at your zipper; pet his lips
and help him clutch you.

Build now your Church, my brothers, sisters. Build
never with brick nor Corten nor with granite.
Build with lithe love. With love like lion-eyes.
With love like morningrise.
With love like black, our black—
Love's another departure.
worship the Wall
Will there be any arrivals, confirmations?
The time complete; continuous.”
Will there be gleaning?
cracks into furious flower. Lifts its face
all unashamed. And sways in wicked grace.
Whose half-black hands assemble oranges
is tom-tom hearted
(goes in bearing oranges and boom).

And there are bells for orphans—
and red and shriek and sheen.
A garbageman is dignified
as any diplomat.
Big Bessie's feet hurt like nobody's business,
but she stands—bigly—under the unruly scrutiny, stands in the wild weed.

I mount the rattling wood. Walter
Mary, the Shakedancer's child
says, "She is good." Says, "She
from the rooming-flat, pants carefully, peers at
our Sister Is." In front of me
her laboring lover. . . .
she is a citizen
hundreds of faces, red-brown, brown, black, ivory,
and is a moment of highest quality: admirable
yield me not trust, then yea and their Announcement
Settle for sandwiches! settle for stocking caps!
that they are ready to rile the high-flung ground.
for sudden blood, aborted carnival,
Behind me, Paint.
the props and niceties of non-loneliness—

~~Herdes~~mes of Leaning.

No child has defiled

the Heroes of this Wall this serious Appointment

this still Wing

this Scald this Flute this heavy Light this Hinge.

An emphasis is paroled.

The old decapitations are revised,

It is lonesome; yes. For we are the last of the loud.
~~the dispossessions beakless.~~

Nevertheless, live.

And we sing.

Conduct your blooming in the noise and whip of the whirlwind.

FROM
RIOT | 1969

Riot

A riot is the language of the unheard.

—MARTIN LUTHER KING

The Third Sermon on the Warpland

John Cabot, out of Wilma, once a Wycliffe,

Phoenix

all whitebluerose below his golden hair,

In Egyptian mythology, a bird which lived for five

thousand years, and which wrapped richly in right linen and right wool,

renewed from the ashes."

almost forgot his Jaguar and Lake Bluff;

—WEBSTER

almost forgot Grandtully (which is The

Best Thing That Ever Happened To Scotch); almost

forgot the sculpture at the Richard Gray

and Distelheim; the kidney pie at Maxim's,

the Grenadine de Boeuf at Maison Henri.

Because the Negroes were coming down the street.
The earth is a beautiful place.

Watermirrors and things to be reflected.

Goldenrod across the little lagoon.

Because the Poor were sweaty and unpretty
The Black Philosopher says
(not like Two Dainty Negroes in Winnetka)
“Our chains are in the keep of the Keeper
and they were coming toward him in rough ranks.
in a labeled cabinet
In seas. In windsweep. They were black and loud.
on the second shelf by the cookies.
And not detainable. And not discreet.
sonatas, the arabesques

There’s a rattle, sometimes.

You do not hear it who mind only
cookies and crunch them.

You do not hear the remarkable music—‘A
Death Song For You Before You Die.’

If you could hear it
you would make music too.

The *blackblues*.”

Gross Gross. “*Que tu es grossier!*” John Cabot

itched instantly beneath the nourished white

that told his story of glory to the World.

In “Jessie’s Kitchen”
“Don’t let it touch me! the blackness! Lord!” he whispered
nobody’s eating Jessie’s Perfect Food.
to any handy angel in the sky.

Crazy flowers

cry up across the sky, spreading

and hissing *This is*

it.

But, in a thrilling announcement, on It drove
and breathed on him: and touched him. In that breath
the fume of pig foot, chitterling and cheap chili,
~~The young, unhooked John.~~ And, in terrific touch, old
averted doubt jerked forward decently,
They will not steal Bing Crosby but will steal
cried "Cabot! John! You are a desperate man,
Melvin Van Peebles who made Lillie
and the desperate die expensively today."
a thing of Zampoughi a thing of red wiggles and trebles
(and I know there are twenty wire stalks sticking out of her head
as her underfed haunches jerk jazz.)

John Cabot went down in the smoke and fire
and broken glass and blood, and he cried “Lord!
Forgive these nigguhs that know not what they do.”

A clean riot is not one in which little rioters
long-stomped, long-straddled, BEANLESS
but knowing no Why
go steal in hell
a radio, sit to hear James Brown
and Mingus, Young-Holt, Coleman, John, on V.O.N.
and sun themselves in Sin.

However, what
is going on
is going on.

Fire.

That is their way of lighting candles in the darkness.

A White Philosopher said

‘It is better to light one candle than curse the darkness.’

These candles curse—
inverting the deeps of the darkness.

GUARD HERE, GUNS LOADED.

The young men run.

The children in ritual chatter

scatter upon

their Own and old geography.

The Law comes sirening across the town.

A woman is dead.
Motherwoman.
She lies among the boxes
(that held the haughty hats, the Polish sausages)
in newish, thorough, firm virginity
as rich as fudge is if you've had five pieces.
Not again shall she
partake of steak
on Christmas mornings, nor of nighttime
chicken and wine at Val Gray Ward's
nor say
of Mr. Beetley, Exit Jones, Junk Smith

nor neat New-baby Williams (man-to-many)
“He treat me right.”

That was a gut gal.

“We’ll do an us!” yells Yancey, a twittering twelve.
“Instead of your deathintheafternoon,
kill ’em, bull!
kill ’em, bull!”

The Black Philosopher blears
“I tell you, *exhaustive* black integrity
would assure a blackless America. . . .”

Nine die, Sun-Times will tell
and will tell too
in small black-bordered oblongs “*Rumor? check it
at 744-4111.*”

A Poem to Peanut.

“Coooooooool!” purrs Peanut. Peanut is
Richard—a Ranger and a gentleman.
A Signature. A Herald. And a Span.
This Peanut will not let his men explode.
And Rico will not.
Neither will Sengali.
Nor Bop nor Jeff, Geronimo nor Lover.

These merely peer and purr,
and pass the Passion over.
The Disciples stir
and thousandfold confer
with ranging Rangermen;
mutual in their “Yeah!—
this AIN’T all upinheah!”

“But WHY do These People offend *themselves*?”
say they
who say also “It’s time.
It’s time to help
These People.”

Lies are told and legends made.
Phoenix rises unafraid.

The Black Philosopher will remember:
“There they came to life and exulted,

the hurt mute.

Then it was over.

The dust, as they say, settled.”

FROM
FAMILY PICTURES | 1970

The Life of Lincoln West

Ugliest little boy
that everyone ever saw.
That is what everyone said.

Even to his mother it was apparent—
when the blue-aproned nurse came into the
northeast end of the maternity ward
bearing his squeals and plump bottom
looped up in a scant receiving blanket,
bending, to pass the bundle carefully
into the waiting mother-hands—that this
was no cute little ugliness, no sly baby waywardness
that was going to inch away
as would baby fat, baby curl, and
baby spot-rash. The pendulous lip, the
branching ears, the eyes so wide and wild,
the vague unvibrant brown of the skin,
and, most disturbing, the great head.
These components of That Look bespoke
the sure fibre. The deep grain.

His father could not bear the sight of him.
His mother high-piled her pretty dyed hair and
put him among her hairpins and sweethearts,
dance slippers, torn paper roses.
He was not less than these,
he was not more.

As the little Lincoln grew,
uglily upward and out, he began
to understand that something was
wrong. His little ways of trying
to please his father, the bringing
of matches, the jumping aside at
warning sound of oh-so-large and
rushing stride, the smile that gave
and gave and gave—Unsuccessful!

Even Christmases and Easters were spoiled.
He would be sitting at the
family feasting table, really
delighting in the displays of mashed potatoes
and the rich golden
fat-crust of the ham or the festive
fowl, when he would look up and find
somebody feeling indignant about him.

What a pity what a pity. No love
for one so loving. The little Lincoln
loved Everybody. Ants. The changing
caterpillar. His much-missing mother.
His kindergarten teacher.

His kindergarten teacher—whose
concern for him was composed of one
part sympathy and two parts repulsion.
The others ran up with their little drawings.
He ran up with his.

She
tried to be as pleasant with him as
with others, but it was difficult.
For she was all pretty! all daintiness,
all tiny vanilla, with blue eyes and fluffy
sun-hair. One afternoon she
saw him in the hall looking bleak against
the wall. It was strange because the
bell had long since rung and no other
child was in sight. Pity flooded her.
She buttoned her gloves and suggested
cheerfully that she walk him home. She
started out bravely, holding him by the
hand. But she had not walked far before

she regretted it. The little monkey.
Must everyone look? And clutching her
hand like that . . . Literally pinching
it . . .

At seven, the little Lincoln loved
the brother and sister who
moved next door. Handsome. Well-
dressed. Charitable, often, to him. They
enjoyed him because he was
resourceful, made up
games, told stories. But when
their More Acceptable friends came they turned
their handsome backs on him. He
hated himself for his feeling
of well-being when with them despite—
Everything.

He spent much time looking at himself
in mirrors. What could be done?
But there was no
shrinking his head. There was no
binding his ears.

“Don’t touch me!” cried the little
fairy-like being in the playground.

Her name was Nerissa. The many
children were playing tag, but when
he caught her, she recoiled, jerked free
and ran. It was like all the
rainbow that ever was, going off
forever, all, all the sparklings in
the sunset west.

One day, while he was yet seven,
a thing happened. In the down-town movies
with his mother a white
man in the seat beside him whispered
loudly to a companion, and pointed at
the little Linc.

“THERE! That’s the kind I’ve been wanting
to show you! One of the best
examples of the specie. Not like
those diluted Negroes you see so much of on
the streets these days, but the
real thing.

Black, ugly, and odd. You
can see the savagery. The blunt
blankness. That is the real
thing.”

His mother—her hair had never looked so
red around the dark brown
velvet of her face—jumped up,
shrieked “Go to——” She did not finish.
She yanked to his feet the little
Lincoln, who was sitting there
staring in fascination at his assessor. At the author of his
new idea.

All the way home he was happy. Of course,
he had not liked the word
“ugly.”

But, after, should he not
be used to that by now? What had
struck him, among words and meanings
he could little understand, was the phrase
“the real thing.”

He didn’t know quite why,
but he liked that.
He liked that very much.

When he was hurt, too much
stared at—
too much
left alone—he
thought about that. He told himself
“After all, I’m
the real thing.”

It comforted him.

FROM **Young Heroes II**

To Don at Salaam

I like to see you lean back in your chair
so far you have to fall but do not—
your arms back, your fine hands
in your print pockets.

Paul Robeson

Beautiful. Impudent.

That time
Ready for life.

we all heard it,
A tied storm.

cool and clear,

cutting across the hot grit of the day.

The major Voice.

The adult Voice

forgoing Rolling River,

forgoing tearful tale of bale and barge

and other symptoms of an old despond.

Warning, in music-words

devout and large,

that we are each other's

harvest:

we are each other's

business:

we are each other's

magnitude and bond.

I like to see you wearing your boy smile
whose tribute is for two of us or three.

Sometimes in life
things seem to be moving
and they are not
and they are not
there.
You are there.

Your voice is the listened-for music.

Your act is the consolidation.

I like to see you living in the world.

FROM
BECKONINGS | 1975

The Boy Died in My Alley

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.

Steam Song

Hostilica hears Al Green

That Song it sing the sweetness
like a good Song can,
and make a woman want to
run out and find her man.

Ain got no pretty mansion.

Ain got no ruby ring.

My man is my only
necessary thing.

That Song boil up my blood
like a good Song can.

It make this woman want to
run out and find her man.

Elegy in a Rainbow

Moe Belle's double love song.

When I was a little girl

Christmas was exquisite.

I didn't touch it.

I didn't look at it too closely.

To do that to do that
might nullify the shine.

Thus with a Love
that has to have a Home
like the Black Nation,
like the Black Nation
defining its own Roof
that no one else can see.

Primer for Blacks

Blackness
is a title,
is a preoccupation,
is a commitment Blacks
are to comprehend—
and in which you are
to perceive your Glory.

To Those of My Sisters Who Kept Their Naturals

~~The conscious shout~~ *the teeth.*

of all that is white is

Sisters!
“It’s Great to be white.”

~~I love you.~~
The conscious shout

~~Because you love you.~~
of the slack in Black is

~~Because you are erect.”~~
“It’s Great to be white.”

~~Because you are also bent.~~
Thus all that is white

~~In season, stern, kind.~~
has white strength and yours.

Crisp, soft—in season.

And you withhold.

And you extend.

And you Step out.

And you go back.

And you extend again.

Your eyes, loud-soft, with crying and with smiles,
are older than a million years.

And they are young.

You reach, in season.

You subside, in season.

And All

below the richrough righttime of your hair.

The word Black
has geographic power,
~~You have not bought Blondine.~~
~~pulls everybody in.~~
~~You have not hailed the hot-comb recently.~~
~~Blacks here—~~
~~You never worshiped Marilyn Monroe.~~
~~Blacks there—~~
~~You say: Farrah's hair is hers.~~
~~Blacks wherever they may be.~~
~~You have not wanted to be white.~~
And remember, you Blacks, what they told you—
Nor have you testified to adoration of that state
remember your Education:
with the advertisement of imitation
"one Drop—one Drop
(never successful because the hot-comb is laughing too.)
maketh a brand new Black."

Oh mighty Drop.
—— And because they have given us kindly
so many more of our people
Blackness
stretches over the land.
Blackness—
the Black of it,
the rust-red of it,
the milk and cream of it,
the tan and yellow-tan of it,
the deep-brown middle-brown high-brown of it,

the “olive” and ochre of it—
Blackness
marches on.

The huge, the pungent object of our prime out-ride
is to Comprehend,
~~But on the rough dark Other music!~~
to salute and to Love the fact that we are Black,
~~the Real,~~
which is our “ultimate Reality,”
~~the Right,~~
which is the lone ground
The natural Respect of Self and Seal!
from which our meaningful metamorphosis,
Sisters!
from which our prosperous staccato,
Your hair is Celebration in the world!
group or individual, can rise.

Self-shriveled Blacks.

Begin with gaunt and marvelous concession:

YOU are our costume and our fundamental bone.

All of you—
you COLORED ones,
you NEGRO ones,
those of you who proudly cry
“I’m half INDian”—
those of you who proudly screech
“I’VE got the blood of George WASHington in
MY veins—
ALL of you—
you proper Blacks,
you half-Blacks,
you wish-I-weren’t Blacks,
Niggeroes and Niggerenes.

You.

FROM

THE NEAR-JOHANNESBURG BOY | 1986

The Near-Johannesburg Boy

In South Africa the Black children ask each other: "Have you been detained yet? How many times have you been detained?"

The herein boy does not live in Johannesburg. He is not allowed to live there. Perhaps he lives in Soweto.

My way is from woe to wonder.

A Black boy near Johannesburg, hot
in the Hot Time.

Shorthand Possible

A long marriage makes shorthand possible.

The Everything need not be said.

Much may stay within the head.

These people
Because of old-time double-seeing.

do not like Black among the colors.
Because of old-time double-seeing.

They do not like our

calling our country ours.

They say our country is not ours.

The early answer answers late.
So comfortably out-of-date.

Those people.
Visiting the world as I visit the world.
Those people.
Their bleach is puckered and cruel.

The aged photographs come clear.
To dazzle down the now-and-here.

It is work to speak of my Father. My Father.
His body was whole till they Stopped it.
Suddenly.
With a short shot.
But, before that, physically tall and among us,
he died every day. Every moment.
My Father
First was the crumpling.

I said: "Some day we'll have Franciscan China."

You said: "Some day the Defender will photograph your house."

You said: "I want you to have at least two children."

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

Infirm

Everybody here
is infirm.

Everybody here is infirm.

Oh. Mend me. Mend me. Lord.

Today I
say to them
say to them
say to them, Lord:
look! I am beautiful, beautiful with
my wing that is wounded
my eye that is bonded
or my ear not funded
or my walk all a-wobble.
I'm enough to be beautiful.

You are
beautiful too.

FROM

CHILDREN COMING HOME | 1991

The Coora Flower

Tinsel Marie

Today I learned the *coora* flower
grows high in the mountains of Itty-go-luba Bésa.
Province Meechee.
Pop. 39.

Now I am coming home.

This, at least, is Real, and what I know.

It was restful, learning nothing necessary.

School is tiny vacation. At least you can sleep.

At least you can think of love or feeling your boy friend against you
(which is not free from grief.)

But now it's Real Business.

I am Coming Home.

My mother will be screaming in an almost dirty dress.
The crack is gone. So a Man will be in the house.

I must watch myself.

I must not dare to sleep.

Nineteen Cows in a Slow Line Walking

Jamal

When I was five years old

I was on a train.

From a train window I saw

nineteen cows in a slow line walking.

Each cow was behind a friend.
Except for the first cow,
who was God.

I smiled until
one cow near the end
jumped in front of a friend.

That reminded me of my mother and of my father.
It spelled what is their Together.

I was sorry for the spelling lesson.

I turned my face from the glass.

I Am A Black

Kojo

According to my Teachers,
I am now an African-American.

Uncle Seagram

Merle

They call me out of my name.
My uncle likes me too much.

BLACK is an open umbrella.
I am five and a half years old, and in kindergarten.
I am Black and A Black forever.
In kindergarten everything is clean.

I am one of The Blacks.

My uncle is six feet tall with seven bumps on his chin.

My uncle is six feet tall, and he stumbles.

He stumbles because of his Wonderful Medicine
packed in his pocket all times.

We are Here, we are There.
Family is ma and pa and my uncle,
We occur in Brazil, in Nigeria, Ghana,
three brothers, three sisters, and me.
in Botswana, Tanzania, in Kenya,
in Russia, Australia, in Haiti, Soweto,
in Grenada, in Cuba, in Panama, Libya,
in England and Italy, France.

We are graces in any places.
Every night at my house we play checkers and dominoes.
I am Black and A Black
My uncle sits *close*.
forever.
There aren't any shoes or socks on his feet.
Under the table a big toe tickles my ankle.
Under the oilcloth his thin knee beats into mine.
And mashes. And mashes.

I am other than Hyphenation.
When we look at TV
my uncle picks *me* to sit on his lap.
As I sit, he gets hard in the middle.
I squirm, but he keeps me, and kisses my ear.

I say, proudly, MY PEOPLE!
I am not even a girl
I say, proudly, OUR PEOPLE!

Our People do not disdain to eat yams or melons or grits
Once, when I went to the bathroom,
or to put peanut butter in stew.
my uncle noticed, came in, shut the door,
put his long white tongue in my ear,
and whispered “We’re Best Friends, and Family,
and we know how to keep Secrets.”

I am Kojo. In West Afrika Kojo
My uncle likes me too much. I am worried.
means Unconquerable. My parents
named me the seventh day from my birth
in Black spirit, Black faith, Black communion.
I am Kojo. I am A Black.
And I Capitalize my name.

Do not call me out of my name.
I do not like my uncle anymore.

Abruptly

Buchanan

God is a gorilla.

I see him standing in the sky.

He is clouds.

There's a beard that is
white and light gray.

His arms are gorilla arms,
limp at his sides; his fists
not easy but not angry.

I tell my friend.

Pointing, I tell my friend

“God is a gorilla. Look!

There!”

My friend says “It is a crime
to call God a gorilla. You have insulted our God.”

I answer:

“Gorilla is majesty.

Other gorillas

know.”

FROM

IN MONTGOMERY AND OTHER POEMS | 2003

An Old Black Woman, Homeless, and Indistinct

1.

Your every day is a pilgrimage.

A blue hubbub.

Your days are collected bacchanals of fear and self-
troubling.

And ²your nights! Your nights.

When you put you down in alley or cardboard or viaduct,
your lovers are rats, finding your secret places.

When³ you rise in another morning,
That's her story,
you hit the street, your incessant enemy.
You're going to vanish, not necessarily nicely, fairly soon,
Although essentially dignity itself a death
is not necessarily tidy, modest or discreet.
When they find you
your legs may not be tidy nor aligned.
Your mouth may be all crooked or destroyed.

See? Here you are, in the so-busy world.
Black old woman, homeless, indistinct—
You walk. You walk.
Your last and least adventure is Review.
You pass The People.
Folks used to celebrate your birthday!
No. The People pass you.
Folks used to say “She’s such a pretty little thing!”
Folks used to say “She draws such handsome horses, cows and houses,”
Folks used to say “That child is going far.”

September, 1992.

Here's a Rich Girl marching briskly to her charms.
She is suede and scarf and belting and perfume.
She sees you not, she sees you very well.
At five in the afternoon Miss Rich Girl will go Home
to brooms and vacuum cleaner and carpeting,
two cats, two marble-top tables, two telephones,
shiny green peppers, flowers in impudent vases, visitors.
Before all that there's luncheon to be known.
Lasagna, lobster salad, sandwiches.
All day there's coffee to be loved.
There are luxuries
of minor dissatisfaction, luxuries of Plan.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Gwendolyn Brooks was born in Topeka, Kansas, on June 7, 1917. She was raised in Chicago, where her parents—Keziah Corinne Wims Brooks, a teacher, and David Anderson Brooks, a janitor—had moved while she was an infant. She graduated from Englewood High School in 1934, and from Wilson Junior College, where she majored in English literature, in 1936. While pursuing her studies, she became a regular contributor of poetry and prose to “Lights and Shadows,” a column in the weekly *Chicago Defender*. She hoped unsuccessfully to join the *Defender* staff as a reporter, working instead at a number of odd jobs and eventually as publicity director for the NAACP Youth Council. She married Henry L. Blakely, a writer, in 1939, and had a son, Henry, in 1940 (her daughter, Nora, was born in 1951). In the early 1940s, she began to publish poetry in national magazines such as *Harper's*, *Poetry*, and the *Saturday Review of Literature*; her first book, *A Street in Bronzeville*, appeared in 1945. She was awarded Guggenheim fellowships in 1946 and 1947. Her second collection of poetry, *Annie Allen* (1949), won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Her first and only novel, *Maud Martha* (1953), was followed by *Bronzeville Girls and Boys* (1956), *The Bean Eaters* (1960), and *Selected Poems* (1963). She began a career as a professor of poetry in 1963, at Columbia College in Chicago, and later taught at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the City College of New York, Northeastern Illinois University, and Chicago State University. In 1968, after the death of Carl Sandburg, she was named poet laureate of Illinois. Her later poetry collections include *In the Mecca* (1968), *Riot* (1969), *Family Pictures* (1970),

Beckonings (1975), *Primer for Blacks* (1980), *The Near-Johannesburg Boy* (1986), *Gottschalk and the Grand Tarantelle* (1988), and *Children Coming Home* (1991); she also edited a number of books, including *Jump Bad: A New Chicago Anthology* (1971), and wrote two volumes of autobiography: *Report from Part One* (1972) and *Report from Part Two* (1996). In 1985–86, she served as Consultant in Poetry, the unofficial poet laureate, at the Library of Congress; in 1995 she won the National Medal of Arts. She died of cancer on December 3, 2000, at her home in Chicago.

NOTE ON THE TEXTS

The poems in this volume are presented in the order in which they first appeared in one of Gwendolyn Brooks's books; some had been published earlier in periodical form, and some were republished—without revision, generally—in one or more collections of her poetry. The texts have been taken from the first printings, listed below:

A Street in Bronzeville. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945.

Annie Allen. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949.

The Bean Eaters. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960.

Selected Poems. New York: Harper & Row, 1963.

In the Mecca. New York: Harper & Row, 1968.

Riot. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969.

Family Pictures. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1970.

Beckonings. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1975.

Primer for Blacks. Chicago: Brooks Press, 1980.

The Near-Johannesburg Boy, and Other Poems. Chicago: The David Company, 1986.

Children Coming Home. Chicago: The David Company, 1991.

In Montgomery, and Other Poems. Chicago: Third World Press, 2003.

The texts of the original printings chosen for inclusion here are presented without change, except for the correction of typographical errors. Spelling, punctuation, and capitalization are often expressive features and are not altered,

even when inconsistent or irregular. Two errors have been corrected: 10.16, inclination.); 108.26, Well—.

NOTES

[16.10](#) *Dorie Miller*] Dorie Miller (1919-1943), who served as ship's cook, third class, on the battleship *West Virginia*, was awarded the Navy Cross for his actions during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. He was killed in the sinking of the escort carrier *Liscome Bay* in the Gilbert Islands.

[35.5–7](#) “pygmies . . . YOUNG] From Young's *Night Thoughts* (1742–46):
“Pygmies are pygmies still, though perchd on Alps; / And pyramids are pyramids
in vales. / Each man makes his own stature, builds himself. / Virtue alone
outbuilds the Pyramids; / Her monuments shall last when Egypt's fall.”

[68.2](#) Emmett Till] Till, a 14-year-old African-American boy from Chicago, was beaten and shot to death in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi, on August 28, 1955, after he allegedly whistled at a white woman; the two white men charged with the crime were acquitted on September 23.

[90.9](#) *Dudley Randall*] Poet (b. 1914) and founder of Broadside Press.

[92.7](#) *Edward Christmas*] Chicago-based flutist and composer.

[93.2](#) Phil Cohran] Chicago-based trumpeter and composer who played with the Sun Ra Arkestra in the late 1950s and was a founder of the AACM.

[94.5](#) Blackstone Rangers] Chicago street gang founded in the early 1960s; it established branches in other cities and was later known variously as the Black P. Stone Nation and El Rukns.

[97.4](#) RON KARENGA] Black nationalist organizer (b. 1941) who founded the group US in the 1960s.

[98.2](#) *Walter Bradford*] Writer associated with the Chicago group Organization of Black American Culture, founded in 1967.

[100.21](#) “*Que tu es grossier!*”] “How crude you are!”

[102.21–22](#) Melvin Van Peebles . . . Lillie . . . Zampoughi] “Lilly Done the Zampoughi Every Time I Pulled Her Coattail,” song by Melvin Van Peebles from his theatrical work *Ain’t Supposed to Die a Natural Death* (1971).

[103.6](#) Young-Holt] Young-Holt Unlimited, a Chicago-based instrumental group founded by members of the Ramsey Lewis Trio, had a number of hit records including “Wack Wack” (1967) and “Soulful Strut” (1968).

[116.2](#) *Al Green*] Soul singer who enjoyed great success beginning in the early 1970s; his records included “I’m Still in Love with You” and “Let’s Stay Together.”

[121.14](#) Farrah’s hair] Farrah Fawcett (b. 1947), sometimes known as Farrah Fawcett-Majors, star of the television series *Charlie’s Angels* in its first season, 1976–77, was known for her elaborate and widely imitated hairstyle.

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