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A Mandala of Hands

John Warner Smith

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A Mandala of Hands

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
In
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

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May, 2012

DEDICATION

For my children and grandchildren

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PREFACE

Part I

I cannot pinpoint with certainty the moment in time when I discovered my passion for reading and writing poetry, but the early 1990s were clearly the years when I stepped onto the road. Perhaps it was my reading Jean Wagner's *Black Poets of the United States* (1973). I do not know with certainty if what lured me to turn the book's pages was my longstanding interest in creative writing or simply the book's evocative title and striking black and white cover.

The major literary influence of my early poems was the Harlem Renaissance writers, particularly Langston Hughes. In Hughes, I rediscovered a unique voice who spoke of and directly to the black masses of his time. I say *rediscovered*, because as an undergraduate student years before, I had found poems such as "The Weary Blues," "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," and "The Negro Mother" to be moving reflections of the life and spirit of black people in America.

There were other influences. As an undergraduate psychology student, I was fascinated with the writings of Carl G. Jung, particularly Jung's concepts of archetypes and symbols of a collective unconscious, and how these forces influence human behavior—that of individuals and societies. Minor in English, I also felt a strong kinship with Emerson and Thoreau and their transcendentalist views on man's relation to nature. My personal study of Jung, Emerson, and Thoreau continued long after college. I liken their influence on my poetry to stones embedded beneath a bubbling brook.

My path to becoming a creative writer has not been conventional, however. By the time I graduated from college, I had grown committed to the ideals of social and economic justice, and I spent my early professional career working to establish programs aimed at fostering economic

development in low-income neighborhoods. By the late 1980s, I had become a public administrator and would eventually become the top administrator of my local government. For me, those years were akin to what W. E. B. Du Bois called the Negro's "peculiar sensation," his "double consciousness,...two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (Du Bois 3). At night, I was reading Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, Carter G. Woodson, E. Franklin Frazier, James Baldwin, and other black scholars and "protest" writers. During the day, I donned the persona of a city manager of a majority white community. My early poetry, which was highly introspective and dealt largely with themes of racial consciousness and black strife, expressed a passion I kept mostly to myself. Only two poems in this manuscript, "Rosa's Winter" and "Hunting Dragonflies," were conceived during those years, although both poems differ considerably from the original versions. Originally titled, "Soul Too Tired to Move," the current version of "Rosa's Winter" employs more figurative language in portraying Rosa's protest action than in the poem's original version. The current version of "Hunting Dragonflies" expands the poem's original focus beyond the dragonflies to reveal the emotional state of the hunter.

In time, I moved away from my fixation on Hughes. Convinced that being a poet was a personal calling of sorts, I read every black poetry anthology in print and discovered a great love for the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton, Nikki Giovanni, Etheridge Knight, and Robert Hayden. By then, I had also discovered the nature poems of Mary Oliver and had grown quite fond of her work. Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays" remains one of my favorite poems. Every reading of the poem stirs a remembrance of my grandfather, a Creole who barely spoke English and had never learned to read or write. As a boy, I'd awake some mornings before dawn and watch him pull his tall, rubber boots up to his knees. I had no idea that on those mornings

my grandfather walked two miles to an ice house on the banks of the Atchafalaya River to pack ice for the fishing boats. Those memories are the source of inspiration for poems I would later write about my father. Several of them are included here.

Then, sometime during the mid 1990s, I stumbled upon an article in *Newsweek Magazine* about the new renaissance emerging in black poetry—a flowering of expression by contemporary black poets such as Rita Dove and Yusef Komunyakaa, who had received literary acclaim not as black poets but as poets in the mainstream literary community. This was a major turning point in my writing experience. Reading Komunyakaa’s *Magic City* and Dove’s *Thomas and Beulah* inspired a different realm of literary possibilities. Several years later, Natasha Trethewey’s *Domestic Work* had the same effect. More than anything, the works of these writers have helped me to understand the poetic slant of much of my writing. Each of these poets manages to weave personal past experiences into a broader social and historical context, and to create beautiful, compelling poetry in the process. One of the best examples is Trethewey’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Native Guard*. Though largely biographical, the collection takes the reader on a journey through the racial tensions of the Jim Crow South.

In 2003, I was accepted to the *Callaloo* Creative Writing Workshops but could not attend due to my mother’s illness. I applied again in 2005, attending that year and in 2007 and 2008. During most of those years, I had the privilege of serving as an agency head on the cabinet of the governor of Louisiana. At *Callaloo*, I had the pleasure of studying under published poets such as Forest Hammer, Terrance Hayes, A. Van Jordan, and Tracy K. Smith. While attending the 2008 workshop, I began to think seriously about publishing my work and pursuing the MFA in Creative Writing. I am deeply indebted to Tracy K. Smith and Dr. Charles Rowell, Editor of *Callaloo*, for their letters of recommendation to the UNO Low-Residency MFA Program.

Part II

The one poet in whose waters I see reflections of my own poetics, at least in regard to the meaning of poetry and the figurative power of symbols and nature, is Robert Frost. Like Frost, I believe that a poem must run its own course and discover its meaning out of the infinite possibilities of meaning. Frost likened this mystique of poetry to a “piece of ice on a hot stove.” He believed that the meaning of the poem must spring spontaneously as a revelation not necessarily intended by the poet but discovered by him or her and ultimately felt by the reader (Frost 985).

I begin every poem with either a visual image of a thing or experience, past or present, or a strongly felt emotion. But I also begin a poem with the expectation that the words on the page will surprise me with meaning. One facet of my writing process that can create unintended distance between words and their meaning is that I do not consciously strive to speak directly in conveying emotion or describing an image. It’s not that I mean to create distance and confusion in meaning, but rather to remain open to spontaneity in the writing process and to the power of natural symbolism. I do strive, however, through sound and imagery, to stimulate a reader’s imagination, thought, and feeling about the experience portrayed on the page.

For many of the poems here, I choose natural settings with objects such as trees, birds, flowers, ponds, rivers, stars, sun and moon as backdrops. Additionally, as with Frost, many of my poems engage the changing force and variability of the four seasons. According to John Lynen, Frost views nature as alien and indifferent—a remoteness that reveals human beings’ own isolation and vulnerability—often depicted in his poetry as a metaphor for human vulnerability and struggle (Lynen 140). While I also see nature in that context, I equally believe

that human interaction with and passage through nature can represent the individual's journey toward self-actualization.

My manuscript's title, *A Mandala of Hands*, I hope, figuratively signifies the collection's theme. "Mandala" is a Hindu word for "circle." In Jungian psychology, the mandala symbolically represents wholeness of the individual self. The imagery of "hand" or "hands" appears in fifteen of the twenty-five poems of this collection, suggesting perhaps a dual symbolism. In Part One, the "hands" imagery conveys the vulnerability and suffering of black children at the hands of forces that sap children of their spirit and life. In the sections that follow, the word takes on the more positive sense of healing, as the mandala begins to unfold through the individual and collective strengths of black women and men, as well as the unity of the black family and race. I see these individuals—their personal trials, sufferings and in many cases deaths—as woven into history, but in essence comprising a collective journey toward wholeness and liberation.

Also, as in Frost's longer poems, my poems here are primarily narrative, and several ("Sands of Somalia," "The Girl Inside," "The Women of Kairos," and "Rain Dance") I composed as dramatic monologues. The narrative form enables me more fully and vividly to depict the interaction and tension between the natural world and human life. Unlike Frost, however, I generally prefer free verse. In addition, my stanzas are written in open form, with the exception of three poems composed in quatrains, "The Songs We Never Heard," "Sisters Mourning," and "Old Sparrow."

"All history," Emerson wrote, "becomes subjective...there is properly no History, only Biography" (Emerson 6). So it is with the experiences I mean to portray. As is often seen in the poetry of Dove, Komunyakaa and Trethewey, the experiences depicted here are real, not

imagined. Some are biographical, but many happened in another time, long before I was born, and in distant places to people I've never met. But in an important way, I have lived these experiences, grown with them, and passed through them in heart and spirit, if not physically in time and place.

Each of the experiences shared here has moved me to feel, think or act in some way that might bend toward light or virtue, at least as I would define it. Each has in some way shaped the limits and possibilities of my own personal journey—even when I have been unconscious of their influence. It is in the vicissitudes and seasons, the awareness and blindness of human self with its strangely conflicting and compensating opposites of power and vulnerability, where I find the inspiration, the need finally, to paint human experience, particularly black experience, through poetry. But poetry does more than recount experiences as history. My hope is that, whether one lives inside or outside these events, knowing or encountering them through poetry draws one nearer to them, so much so that the poem becomes a window to the heart, enabling one to see and remember what might otherwise be overlooked, ignored, or forgotten.

Mount Pilgrim's Children
(Picture Day, 1957)

Young Reverend Phillips has eyes that gleam
like a lily pond struck by morning.
He has taken his time
to sweep the flesh-toned pine,
line the chairs like homegrown snaps,
and tend to the delicate subtleties
of dark and light. Behind him
a wooden chalkboard easel stands
with a step board to point one to ten, A to Z.

Blackbirds perch with eyes open wide
for this still morning shot.
Oh, colored girl in the front row
with the wooden stare
and the hanky balled tightly,
I see your sister's Sunday-worn socks,
your feet barely touching the floor.
Those loose-buckled shoes
are like your grandma's hands,
worn and cracked,
a story in every crease,
like this morning when she rose,
warmed the iron, and one
by one gathered pleats
to press the cancan
draping your pebbled knees.
I see the ribbon she unraveled
to bow-tie the braids she curled
thinking...

*Any minute, child, the taxi will blow.
Ms. Gillespi's sheets need wash.
And I ain't even soaked my feet yet.*

Colored girl, someday you'll know why
miles away in Little Rock, at this moment,
warriors march to a drummer's beat
with a steady bird's-eye aim
on freedom.

Look up!

ONE

*Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf
with the things suffered,
things enjoyed, things done and undone.
Dawn and doom was in the branches.*

Zora Neale Hurston

The Songs We Never Heard

Why, in her dying days,
did my grandmother thank us
for listening? We hadn't heard
the dew-drip taps of tears
that dropped to her pillow,

the thunder rumbling in her womb,
nor the curious soliloquy of cuss
and prayer that seethed through
her midnight-gritting teeth
as she paced the dusty hallways

dragging her feet with the burden
of hungry babies at her breasts
and Jim Crow on her shoulders.
We hadn't heard the soft rattle
of beads streaming through

her coarse hands that ached
as she prayed and bled
as she pushed a plow
or spun the sewing wheel.
When the trumpet blew, we

gathered freshly-cut flowers,
spread like a mort cloth of silk,
scented of frankincense and myrrh,
and walked her path, worn
with the weariness of living.

Recounting her days, we hummed
her Sunday songs in the fading
glow of her last sunset.
But we never heard the blues
our old black mothers know.

Two Creole Women

I. Helen Broussard (“The Popcorn Lady”)

Friday nights, her hands were floury and sticky,
buried in mounds as she made her confections,
wrapped them in wax paper, and stacked them
inside a small, foil-lined, cardboard box.

Saturday mornings, wearing her red dress,
she knocked at my door, cradling her pies,
pralines, and popcorn balls. The distant rumble
of a freight train faded in her stories told,

like the night she went to a party and waited
to dance, then bent her body to the weight
of the man she later married. When she smiled,
a garland of marigolds awoke to the sun.

With her gone, who keeps the recipes,
the measuring cup and rolling pin? Who stirs
the pots and holds a spoon over a bowl of tap water
to drip the hot sugar and cane syrup?

II. Olita Taylor

Those Thursdays, signifying talk cut like knives
when she set two tables and we hurried
past the curbside scent of pork fat and garlic,
past the splintered pine steps and porch screen flies,
past her wrinkled plaid dress and kiss, dripping sweat,
past the buffet pictures of her wedding day and babies,
past the clank of pans and clatter of cast iron pots,
past our talk about movies, sports, and the evening news
about murders, recessions, and food stamps lines,
past the judges, justices and supreme injustices
with their pardons, paroles, and death sentences.
Pass me a plate. Pass the beans and greens. Pass the tea,
and, please, pass all the chicken-shit politicians.

Sisters Mourning

That year, the old sisters wore black in every season,
emptying hope chests like a roof-tearing twister—
so much to keep, so little to pass on. They must have sensed
fear flashing in their uteruses, and wondered

what locust larvae lay dormant beneath the goldenrod,
boring their tender limbs, reminding them
of limpid skies, how bound they were to things living.
Some days they gathered to celebrate the family—

Sundays in the sun, young lovers with nests
full of babies, old lovers with memories cradled
in their brows. Circled beneath a canopy of oaks,
they boiled blue crabs and crawfish in an open flame.

They told their stories with songs and black-and-white
photographs, between shuffled cards and dots counted
on small ivory stones. Now, four hand fans later,
the sisters speak of fallen branches. They take refuge

in beveled mirrors, in quiet times with questions
dangling in a slipknot. From their necks hang
hand-knitted scarves and the albatrosses of pain
not forgiven, salutations written but not sent.

Still, they wait to see the patterns quilted
in springtime, the evergreens blooming in their winters.
Through the lives of their great grandchildren unborn,
they wait, silent about their steep climbs and falls.

Rain Dance

In all your years, you never knew
that long before your words
named me,
I tossed my tiara
and shimmering bodice
to dance the songs
you had yet to sing.

When you first saw me,
I was a young girl
streaking half-naked
across your back yard
just before the bus horn blew,
quick as lightning flashed.
Now, in your dying,
you still wonder
if you were dreaming then.
*Was she
there? Was she
rain bathing or fleeing
some man's hands?*

You called me mama, wife,
your secret lover
who gathered hay, milked the herd
and made a bed where you laid
your hollow self down.
I strung beads,
weaved my round skirt
and spun you
the way drunkenness forgets.

The Women of Kairos

Though we live far from the sea,
we know a time
in the soul's journey
when stars have grown dim
and the vessel enters
a bending, swirling strait.
Rising before dawn, together
we step
past the armed-man gate,
through doors that lock
behind us, concrete
walls enclosed
in a tall, iron fence
with iron thorns curling
across its top.
We enter the courtyard
of Rachel's garden,
where flowers of every kind bloom,
and we walk past Jacob's well.
Shadows lurking in our path,
we climb stairs
to an upper room.
Like a net weaved
tight and wide, or
a ribbon anchoring
ship to shore,
we pray
our light-bearing psalms,
a cappella,
into the dark, blinding night.

Old Sparrow

One Sunday, when Oriental Magnolia bloomed
high above the garden, I visited Aunt Sally
in Room 60, her new home. Like birds' nests,
her lifelong belongings had been tossed to the floor.

From one of the two bundles, I lifted
a blue hooded shirt and pulled it over her head
and shoulders. I slipped a pair of wool clogs
on her feet, then lifted her arms to a walker.

The scars of madness had faded in her face,
shrunk now with thick manly brows, her body
frail as a broken-winged sparrow, weightless
in the air she struggled to breathe, in the pain

she could not speak of. I imagine she slept
the way I saw her the following Friday,
lying on her back, mouth open wide, gasping,
her forehead cool as spring water, hair soft

as hand-sewn silk. After the cup-shaped petals
had fallen, I would see her once more. Again,
I collected the straws of her two wind-tossed
nests, one of them still strewn on the floor.

Vigil

(For Mother, 1936-2003)

You spent your last days tangled
in the tributaries that drowned
every movement and sound.
I could never tell
what your jaundiced stare saw,
whether my words folded
halves of your heart
or colored the portraits
you might have seen in my kisses
to your sweat-beading brow.
No bird song lulled
your wind-borne leaves.
But I knew by the candy red
gloss of your nails, that you
had come to die.

On the walls of your room, pale
as frostbit ground, hung pages
of a calendar that had stopped turning.
Like the tulips Akemie sent
FedEx from Gainesville, the balloon
Orianna brought refused to die.
Sermons and songs stayed
muted in the television that hung
above your bundle of belongings.

In days that went too long
without rain
to keep your gladiolas alive,
the May sun locked
a mandala of hands.
Like the Magnolia grove
blooming outside your window,
we circled your bed.

TWO

. . . we all came here as candidates for the slaughter of the innocents.

James Baldwin

Hunting Dragonflies

If you got lucky you would swat a big one
with a stick that had no other purpose
just after the sun dropped,
when twilight hid the slow pitch.
You would hurry too late
to pinch her thin translucent wings
before she recovered and fluttered,
darting the ghostly plain
even your thoughts would not enter.

One day when a warm beam sealed
the mud pond, you held your breath
and crept through the cattails
to sneak up on a little one,
her wings like brittle leaves.
She wilted in the weight of your hand
until you sighed and let go.
Yet, sooner than you blinked
she crisscrossed the sky,
taking your breath with her,
leaving your scent
dangling like a jingling chime.

If you got lucky, she'd flit right by
your hawk-eyed stare
and tangle in the sweet-briar.
You could reach in—free her
and hold her the way a morning breeze
sways a robin's nest. Instead,
you put her in your darkened room,
the garden of your dreams,
cluttered with the memory
of your father's heavy coarse hands
and the thump you felt
swatting into a drowning light.

Hand-Sewn Dolls

New Year's Day dawned
with a crisp blue sky.
Ornaments had just come down
though tinsel still glistened in the pine.
On the front lawn,
yellow violas sparkled on a blanket
of frost and fallen leaves.

When the sun fell, an arctic blast
arrived. Winter's claws gripped
the shanty shot-gun house.
Children inside lay like loaves
beside a faulty space heater
crackling and jetting its flames.
I can only imagine
the cries and screams
deafened by the icy wind whistling
as it rattled the half-caulked panes.

Now, two mornings later,
the wind still swirls the ashes.
A scent of charred cypress clings
to the coats of mourners
who snake the curbside altar
lined with teddy bears, poster boards
and ribbon-tied potted mums.

Nearby stands a winterberry tree,
flush with evergreen and holly.
I drive by and peek
inside until the eyes of the five
hand-sewn dolls
someone has placed there
stare back, turning me away.

The Girl Inside

I. The Rooftop, Ninth Ward, New Orleans

I just keep thinking what Granny told me:
Close your eyes, Autumn.
Whatever you do, don't look
down. Just pretend
you're not here.

So I shut my eyes and squeeze my hands
like sponge balls, tight as I can.

I'm so scared

I can't feel my body.

All I can see is black,
like being underground.

I've never been underground,
but I've been in rooms
with no lights on
and I had to pop my eyes wide open
just to see something.

I feel my body coming back
now, as my feet leave the roof.

I'm in the sky,

going *up, up, up*,

yet it feels more like a tunnel.

The hard wind stings my face.

My ears hurt, too.

I can't stop trembling.

My body shakes all over—my jaws,
my arms, my legs.

I pretend I am a bird

flapping my wings

up, up, up

toward the sun.

II. The Superdome

The helicopter brought us here.

We sleep on the floor.

I keep waiting for the police
to come back and take us home.

I lie on my backpack

with my hands behind my head
and look up at the high ceiling,
counting the bright lights in the circle—
101, 102, 103, 104, 105.

The more I look up
the brighter the lights get,
the smaller my body feels.

The boy next to me keeps throwing up
and his nose bleeds. He's curled up
and resting his head in his sister's arms.
He could die here, his sister says.
She says they slept on a bridge last night.
They saw dead people floating in the water.
One time, I saw a bug in Granny's back yard.
I watched his tiny legs crawl to the leaves,
then I poked him with a stick
and he also curled into a ball.

Now, it stays dark in here all the time.
I don't know why.
Stay close to me, Autumn, Granny says.
Don't move, stay put.
I'm hungry.
They don't feed us or give us any water.
I feel like a big rock is pulling me down,
way down, under the ground.
The air stinks in here, too,
so I hold my breath as long as I can.
All these shouts and screams
and popping sounds scare me.
But I try not to get scared.
Am I going to die?

Then, I look up and remember
I'm a little girl.
I've been here before
in a wave.
I remember seeing it come
from the other side,
watching it roll, waiting
to throw my body inside it
at just the right second.
I slid to the edge of my chair
and held my arms out, then
up, up, up.

I didn't want to let it go.
When it passed, I was still rolling.

III. Bus Ride

The soldiers came to get us.
But I don't know where we're going.
Out the window, I see
nothing but houses and trees
knocked down.
Everything is in the river,
even cars and trucks!
When I look down, I wonder,
Is this where the boy and his sister slept?
Is this where they saw dead people
floating in the water?

IV. Renaissance Village

I live in a trailer now.
It's crowded where I sleep,
and it feels stuffy all the time,
like I'm in a playhouse.
I can hardly breathe
inside. I don't want to talk
or even look at people.
People I know, like my best
friend Tamika, are gone,
but I know
one day I'll be gone, too.
I'll curl myself into a ball
and roll far out into the sea,
or I'll fly away,
up, up, up,
looking straight at the sun.

A Letter to Jeremiah To Be Read Years From Now

I

Your father died a month short of your third year,
four months after Hurricane Katrina.
Driving to Hattiesburg for his funeral, I watched
the flat land roll softly into the hills.
All the pines lay stiffly on the ground.

That morning, in the vestibule behind the sanctuary,
I sat with you and your brothers, waiting.
Jeremiah, stop running, I repeated.
Stop pushing, Jeremiah.
Joseph, leave him alone.
When they closed the casket, we went inside
to sit with the family.
No one wanted to cry aloud,
the air eerie as the eye of a storm.

II

One hot summer day when you were five,
we drove to the mall. I know Autumn felt left out,
but I wanted to go shopping with only the boys.
The boulevard of the main entrance was old,
but the tall palm trees had just been planted.
Even I felt in a different place.
I wondered why the branches still stood tied.

You sat in the back seat between Joseph and James,
while John Elisha sat up front.
Who has been here before? I asked,
to which you answered, *Not me, Paw Paw.*

When we shopped, you didn't want the same color
as Joseph's, so you picked green plaid short pants
with lines that clashed with the abstract design
of your pale green shirt. It said nothing
and everything about you.

III

Jeremiah, you *had* been there before,
with your brothers and me,
three days before your father's funeral.
The palm trees hadn't been planted yet.
But it was Christmastime.
Wreaths and red ribbons decked the boulevard,
and you saw Santa and bright-colored lights.
Like a butterfly fluttering on a blossoming bough,
you perched atop the carousel horse,
then flitted through the aisles of the toy store.

I know you don't remember. In time you may
hurt, even without the memory of your father.
Will you know his goodness and understand
why he took his life? Will you forgive him?
Will you stand tall in all seasons,
your branches blooming strong and wide?

When we left the mall, we went to the river
and stood on the levee
to watch the big barges drag the current.
Like logs, we rolled our bodies
down the steep slope, our arms raised high,
giving ourselves to the ground and open air.

July 2008
St. Louis, Missouri

Samuel and Solomon, Age Six

Such a hard thing to understand,
the newspaper headline quoted
the boys' uncle as saying.
Perhaps the photographs pulled me
inside—a snapshot of the boys,
their arms raised high,
tiny specks of light beaming
in the center of their black marble eyes,
brightening their broad smiles
with cheeks bulging like buds
waiting to bloom.

And the photo of the procession:
young black men
flanking two small boxes,
two men to a side, carrying
the prophet and the king.
With heads bowed, they grip
the shiny chrome handles
of the baby blue caskets
draped with white carnations.
Like Samuel and Solomon,
the men wear white gloves,
pink shirts and blue neckties,
no jackets, no pinned boutonnieres.

A short drive from the maple-lined field
dotted with gray tombstones,
red, yellow and white roses,
the mother sits in county jail.
The news reports how, not why,
she killed them, then tried to kill herself.

Now, four years later,
as I've pulled this faded, torn newspaper
from a dresser drawer
half-filled with laminated memories,
these images, like bulbs once buried
and forgotten inside the cold,
lifeless ground of December,
sprout in the warm blush of May.

Cries Beyond the Mountains

For Haiti's Children

I. 1611

Before the sun is born and a cry stirs
the shaman's dream, the flock gives what silence
takes away: mating calls fluttering in the soft pelting rain,
scatting inside the sweet cradle of eucalypti
that rise above the cloth-draped masts.
But when the sun sinks behind the granite peaks,
and oars push the slave ships back out to sea,
the birds gather their wings and line the shoal
where the footprints of their young wash away.
Like sand-buried bones, human, broken,
all that remains is what silence gives:
cries drowning in the woodland and churning
in the waves, while the feathers of ravaged nests
swirl in the pitch-black night.

II. 2011

When hunger is the villagers' anthem and they have
no bread, they curry moons, they break stars.
Their song is in their hands, so they cut wood,
make fire, let heat stretch the drum skins.
Only then do they grip the sticks and beat.
And the world that hears, looks but doesn't see
the children coiled on rock-dirt floors,
their coffins lining the wailing streets,
while mothers mourn in evensong, and fathers,
like the plague they carry womb to womb, migrate.
Though the birds glide over the quicksand shores
and drums beat the villagers into flesh,
there is no peace for these voices, this sky,
this precious rock gleaming wildly in the sea.

Sands of Somalia

For months Baidoa saw no rain,
no crops, only war and death.
Soldiers sold off our corn rations,
while our babies became skin and bone.
Forty nights we crossed the desert.
No water. Our feet blistered,
so we made the daylight sand our bed.

One morning while we slept—
rebels ambushed. They beat me
and took the last of the food.
We thought of going back
but we had to press on.
Then, late one night a week ago,
I watched my daughter die.
We buried her in the sand
with our hands, with only our prayers
to mark her grave. The moon,
big as the sun,
made the white sands sparkle,
as though we walked among stars.
But with Nadifa gone, everything
shining drowned in our tears.

Here at the camp we must wait.
That's all we can do.
Too many need help.
My wife is going mad now,
and our youngest is very sick.
He breathes from his belly—
no food, no sound,
not even a cry, only air.
Look. His skull sinks in.
See. Put your hand there.
Feel the hole.

THREE

*There comes a time when people get tired
of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression.*

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Emmett Till

Two cents for a piece of bubble gum.
That's what he went to buy.
Bye, baby. That's what they said
he spoke to the storekeeper's wife.

Like Herod's soldiers, they went,
darkness cloaked in moon glow,
and wrenched him from the stars,
stripped his mangled body
and dumped him in the river
to languish like old driftwood.
In the sweltering Delta heat
they left him to swell and rot
in an unmarked grave
of bitter black mud.

Could it have been
a wolf whistle he stuttered
that cocked the rage
that felled the blows
that crushed his bones,
ground his meaty cheeks
into raw mottled mush,
and gouged his hazel eyes,
dark as the pinewood box
they packed, nailed and boarded
for his last train ride north,
home to his mama?

Was it the bullet in his skull
or the gin fan
hanging from the barbed wire
they tied to his neck? How did
they lynch him?

Plessy v. Plessy

As white as Plessy was
in a shoemaker's apron,
he wasn't white
enough—
white enough, maybe,
by ebony keys he danced to
at Madam Rochon's Parlor
or by tan hide soles he stitched
to London boots,
but still not white enough.

Plessy could never be
white enough
to ride first class in a railcar
or sit in the balcony
at Le Petit Theatre
and flaunt his ruffled
cuffs and cashmere frock.
On this Southern Comfort
night, not one colored child
would be lost in the stars,
not one
ounce of colored blood
would drip and not be heard
against the rails, rumbling
and clanging as they rolled.

Plessy could never be
white, not even in the mirror
of an octoroon ball
with its debutante sea
of Parisian silk gowns
and femmes de couleur
perfumed with the sweetest
water of New Orleans. Plessy,
for all his pallor
and panache, could never,
ever be white enough.

Rosa's Winter

I.

Montgomery is blind
to the rock fault
that slips deep below
her jailhouse drone.
With strong winds whirling
overhead, she slow dances
in her daring,
careening in a waltz
through lazy mint julep days.
Her buses make black clouds
as they roll
down her fissured roads,
drowning the jingles
of caroling bells
and dimes trickling
fare machines.

II.

In no-man's-land,
Rosa sews a quilt
to warm her winter nights.
She cuts the buckling patches,
spreads them
across her hardwood floor,
then threads a pattern
of a young preacher
fanning hot coals, stirring
flames high as torch-lit crosses.
His cadence sounds
the beat of weary blues—
first a hush, a hum,
then foot-stomping thunder,
a swirling twister
of colored discontent.

Harlem the Morning After

By nightfall Harlem knew
who shot and killed the prince.
Mayhem and Molotov exploded.
Billy clubs and guns whipped rioters.
Someone bombed a mosque
and blew its roof off.

The next morning, like dripstone
in a cave, icicles hung
from verandas and zigzag stairs.
Amber glowed in street lights
as frozen as the siren and bell
of a parked red pumper.

Inside that crystal crevasse,
on the precipice of a winter storm,
a steel door slammed shut.
Malcolm's voice, like a canon blast
or a Sunday contralto,
soared from the bell towers.

Letter to the Oaks

I. Charleston, 1863

Long before frost kissed
the shoal, before geese foretold
a miracle of raindrops congealing
on a mud pond,
you were the envy of maple.
In autumn you were ginkgo
beneath azure crisp and glazing.
Your fan petals fell
ripe in winter
with arms spread like the sails
of the last slave ship
pushing off the coast of Gambia.
What bled and drowned
in the light of those
parched moons,
when they packed humans
in the bowel stench of a hold,
can never be redeemed,
never in your sweet shade
or under your crown of innocence,
when placenta dries
in a cotton field
and horse hoofs clop
on a hangman's road.

II. Birmingham, 1963

You were just a seedling,
tall and slender in girth
when you gave sanctuary
to newborn sparrows
who flew the geese flight.
The breath wind of slaves
seared your mama's boughs,
sent cries soaring moonward
over black waves
along the coast of Senegal.
And then the cataclysm.
Cannons ripped your green

swaying locks and rained
leaves, blood-soaked,
across two fields staking
their claim to your roots.
If there is time for truth
it is now, when you grow
old hearing beacon shrills
at dawn waking
birth of big dreams,
and you stand
the shifts of seas, of mountains,
and of human conscience.

FOUR

*What did I know, what did I know
Of love's austere and lonely offices?*

Robert Hayden

Flames

One King Holiday, I wheeled you
to the nursing home patio.
Drifting in and out of your blank stare,
I read Trethewey's "Southern History,"
recalling the year at Rosteet Junior High,
when Ms. Troutman, the Civics teacher,
said Hoover was right to call King
a Communist. That was a lie,
I knew, but enough to make
Hugh Morton and his pals hate
even more. I never told you
about the school dining hall, the blob
of slimy warm spit splattered,
streaming like blood
down the back of my head,
the pale faces behind me sneering.

That year, a bad spine kept you home
for weeks. On those mornings,
I rose early to cook two eggs for you
over easy. Keeping the flame low
and blue beneath the old black skillet,
I dragged the spatula slowly
to gather the frothing butter,
careful not to break the yolk
nor harden the thin white.
Across town, Mama's polished
corn-slit shoes and air-dried
nylon dress had already stained
with grease from Mr. Woody's
hot oven broiler.

Daddy, gazing into your eyes,
the longleaf swaying,
the sun's yolk peeking
through gray clouds behind you,
I wondered if I'd ever really known
the burdens you bore.

Crossing

I

Workdays you tiptoed the high wire
and steep cliff ledge, wearing blue twill
and a bright orange vest,
each crosswalk a sea, a compass, a cargo of children.
Still, Earth passed you by
with time pieces you strapped
to each wrist for trips to Texas and California,
circling city blocks and returning home.

“Something has fallen out of my head,”
you said, just weeks before
Katrina made bones of the city
and broke the hand of Jesus.
When Rita came exhaling,
I begged you to leave,
but you stayed— half-beast, half-child,
living in no-man’s-land.

You resisted my tearing down
the great wall you built of ants,
souring pots and junk mail.
One morning I pulled a drawer
and found your pistol, old vials of blue pills
and years of unspent cash.

II

Stars drown
in the black drone of waves.

 You cross
 in cold light.
 You lie down
with newborn fields
and scented voices,
 a titter and a word
 short of laughter.
Hands lock in a mudra.
 We feed you.

Old vessel, sweet daemon,
do we cage you crib-like
to protect you from yourself?
Or is it the delicate crystal within
we fear?

My Father's Tears

You always seemed to wear a mask.
The day we buried Mama,
you stood like a guard, gazing
steadfast and straight ahead,
as though you were not lost
and needed no help
to find your way.
But in your dry-eyed calm,
your words stuttered,
your shirt and tie didn't match,
and one small tear ran
down the seam
of your wrinkled pants.

Growing up, I never saw you cry.
If I had, you wouldn't have allowed me
to reach in and touch
the drops streaming,
rub their silky softness
between my fingers, then brush them
across your stiff, bristled face.

Today, you are the child—all body
and sounds without words.
Before the Christmas party,
the nursing assistant dressed you
in someone else's pants and boots.
She put you in the flannel plaid shirt
you had worn often
when you tinkered with your engines.
As you sat in the wheelchair and ate,
your body slouching to one side,
you sank more deeply
into a valley without laughter.
Like melted snow, tears at last
flowed, bursting the banks
of a long, winding, ancient river.

Theinnessen Pond

Where my father once lived, I stroll
the banks of a man-made pond
full of fish that don't jump.
At night, the old man wandered outdoors.
I feared he would slip into the water,
so I moved him to another home,
where he fell and broke his hip,
never to walk again.

Seen from the south in the midday sun,
the pond hangs framed like a landscape portrait,
as if it were nighttime and the fish have died
and the sky doesn't sing so crystal blue
that it shatters in my eyes.

When I drift to the other side, beyond
the ducks circling a mound of cattails,
the surface sparkles and glitters,
but I see neither land nor water, only
two worlds colliding. Time
is not when but where, and truth
as much what I can't see as what I believe.

Watching My Father's Hands

Years ago, my father's day always ended
with a question-

mark-shaped hook
behind a narrow door, shut,
where he slipped out of the grime
and grit of the train tracks,
settling to a table Mama had set.

His big denim overalls were heavy,
oily, smelling of sweat
and daylong sun,

pockets too deep
for a child's hands.

I dug slowly into them,
sifted sandy pebbles
and crumpled paper,
fumbled for his pocket knife,
a clump of ringed keys.

Gently, I quieted the tinkling
taps and took few enough coins
not to be missed, believing
no grown man
would count change so small.

Today, watching his hands
cling to a table top corner,
I sense his mind groping,
grazing the bare, slumbering fields,
taking what he finds.

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