

African American Shorts

Cultural Identity in America (ENG 235)



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“Expressive Language” (Amiri Baraka)

Speech is the effective form of a culture. Any shape or cluster of human history still apparent in the conscious and unconscious habit of groups of people is what I mean by culture. All culture is necessarily profound. The very fact of its longevity, of its being what it is, culture, the epic memory of practical tradition, means that it is profound. But the inherent profundity of culture does not necessarily mean that its uses (and they are as various as the human condition) will be profound. German culture is profound. Generically. Its uses, however, are specific, as are all uses . . . of ideas, inventions, products of nature. And specificity, as a right and passion of human life, breeds what it breeds as a result of context.

Context, in this instance, is most dramatically social. And the social, though it must be rooted, as are all evidences of existence, in culture, depends for its impetus for the most part on a multiplicity of influences. Other cultures, for instance. Perhaps, and this is a common occurrence, the reaction or interreaction of one culture on another can produce a social context that will extend or influence any culture in many strange directions.

Social also means economic, as any reader of nineteenth-century European philosophy will understand. The economic is part of the social—and in our time much more so than what we have known as the spiritual or metaphysical, because the most valuable canons of power have either been reduced or traduced into stricter economic terms. That is, there has been a shift in the actual meaning of the world since Dante lived. As if Brooks Adams were right. Money does not mean the same thing to me it must mean to a rich man. I cannot, right now, think of one meaning to name. This is not so simple to understand. Even as a simple term of the English language, money does not possess the same meanings for the rich man as it does for me, a lower-middle-class American, albeit of laughably “aristocratic” pretensions. What possibly can “money” mean to a poor man? And I am not talking now about those courageous products of our permissive society who walk knowledgeably into “poverty” as they would into a public toilet. I mean, The Poor.

I look in my pocket; I have seventy cents. Possibly I can buy a beer. A quart of ale, specifically. Then I will have twenty cents with which to annoy and seduce my fingers when they wearily search for gainful employment. I have no idea at this moment what that seventy cents will mean to my neighbor around the corner, a poor Puerto Rican man I have seen hopefully watching my plastic garbage can. But I am certain it cannot mean the same thing. Say to David Rockefeller, “I have money,” and he will think you mean something entirely different. That is, if you also dress the part. He would not for a moment think, “Seventy cents.” But then neither would many New York painters.

Speech, the way one describes the natural proposition of being alive, is much more crucial than even most artists realize. Semantic philosophers are certainly correct in their emphasis on the final dictation of words over their users. But they often neglect to point out that, after all, it is the actual importance, power, of the words that remains so finally crucial. Words have users, but as well, users have words. And it is the users that establish the world’s realities. Realities being those fantasies that control your immediate span of life. Usually they are not your own fantasies, i.e., they belong to governments, traditions, etc., which, it must be clear by now, can make for conflict with the singular human life all ways. The fantasy of America might hurt you, but it is what should be meant when one talks of “reality.” Not only the things you can touch or see, but the things that make such touching or seeing “normal.” Then words, like their users, have a hegemony. Socially—which is final, right now. If you are some kind of artist, you naturally might think this is not so. There is the future. But immortality is a kind of drug, I think—one that leads to happiness at the thought of death. Myself, I would rather live forever . . . just to make sure.

The social hegemony, one’s position in society, enforces more specifically one’s terms (even the vulgar have “pull”). Even to the mode of speech. But also it makes these terms an available explanation of any

social hierarchy, so that the words themselves become, even informally, laws. And of course they are usually very quickly stitched together to make formal statutes only fools or the faithfully intrepid would dare to question beyond immediate necessity.

The culture of the powerful is very infectious for the sophisticated, and strongly addictive. To be any kind of “success” one must be fluent in this culture. Know the words of the users, the semantic rituals of power. This is a way into wherever it is you are not now, but wish, very desperately, to get into.

Even speech then signals a fluency in this culture. A knowledge at least. “He’s an educated man,” is the barest acknowledgment of such fluency . . . in any time. “He’s hip,” my friends might say. They connote a similar entrance.

And it is certainly the meanings of words that are most important, even if they are no longer consciously acknowledged, but merely, by their use, trip a familiar lever of social accord. To recreate instantly the understood hierarchy of social, and by doing that, cultural, importance. And cultures are thought by most people in the world to do their business merely by being hierarchies. Certainly this is true in the West, in as simple a manifestation as Xenophobia, the naïve bridegroom of anti-human feeling, or in economic terms, Colonialism. For instance, when the first Africans were brought into the New World, it was thought that it was all right for them to be slaves because “they were heathens.” It is a perfectly logical assumption.

And it follows, of course, that slavery would have been an even stranger phenomenon had the Africans spoken English when they first got here. It would have complicated things. Very soon after the first generations of Afro-Americans mastered this language, they invented white people called Abolitionists.

Words’ meanings, but also the rhythm and syntax that frame and propel their concatenation, seek their culture as the final reference for what they are describing of the world. An A flat played twice on the same saxophone by two different men does not have to sound the same. If these men have different ideas of what they want this note to do, the note will not sound the same. Culture is the form, the overall structure of organized thought (as well as emotion and spiritual pretension). There are many cultures. Many ways of organizing thought, or having thought organized. That is, the form of thought’s passage through the world will take on as many diverse shapes as there are diverse groups of travelers. Environment is one organizer of groups, at any level of its meaning. People who live in Newark, New Jersey, are organized, for whatever purpose, as Newarkers. It begins that simply. Another manifestation, at a slightly more complex level, can be the fact that blues singers from the Midwest sing through their noses. There is an explanation past the geographical, but that’s the idea in tabloid. And singing through the nose does propose that the definition of singing be altered . . . even if ever so slightly. (At this point where someone’s definitions must be changed, we are flitting around at the outskirts of the old city of Aesthetics. A solemn ghost town. Though some of the bones of reason can still be gathered there.)

But we still need definitions, even if there already are many. The dullest men are always satisfied that a dictionary lists everything in the world. They don’t care that you may find out something extra, which one day might even be valuable to them. Of course, by that time it might even be in the dictionary, or at least they’d hope so, if you asked them directly.

But for every item in the world, there are a multiplicity of definitions that fit. And every word we use could mean something else. And at the same time. The culture fixes the use, and usage. And in “pluralistic” America, one should always listen very closely when he is being talked to. The speaker might mean something completely different from what we think we’re hearing. “Where is your pot?”

I heard an old Negro street singer last week, Reverend Pearly Brown, singing, “God don’t never change!” This is a precise thing he is singing. He does not mean “God does not ever change!” He means “God don’t

never change!” The difference, and I said it was crucial, is in the final human reference . . . the form of passage through the world. A man who is rich and famous who sings, “God don’t never change,” is confirming his hegemony and good fortune . . . or merely calling the bank. A blind hopeless black American is saying something very different. He is telling you about the extraordinary order of the world. But he is not telling you about his “fate.” Fate is a luxury available only to those fortunate citizens with alternatives. The view from the top of the hill is not the same as that from the bottom of the hill. Nor are most viewers at either end of the hill, even certain that, in fact, there is any other place from which to look. Looking down usually eliminates the possibility of understanding what it must be like to look up. Or try to imagine yourself as not existing. It is difficult, but poets and politicians try every other day.

Being told to “speak proper,” meaning that you become fluent with the jargon of power, is also a part of not “speaking proper.” That is, the culture which desperately understands that it does not “speak proper,” or is not fluent with the terms of social strength, also understands somewhere that its desire to gain such fluency is done at a terrifying risk. The bourgeois Negro accepts such risk as profit. But does close-ter (in the context of “jes a close-ter, walk withee”) mean the same thing as closer? Close-ter, in the term of its user is, believe me, exact. It means a quality of existence, of actual physical disposition perhaps . . . in its manifestation as a tone and rhythm by which people live, most often in response to common modes of thought best enforced by some factor of environmental emotion that is exact and specific. Even the picture it summons is different, and certainly the “Thee” that is used to connect the implied “Me” with, is different. The God of the damned cannot know the God of the damner, that is, cannot know he is God. As no Blues person can really believe emotionally in Pascal’s God, or Wittgenstein’s question, “Can the concept of God exist in a perfectly logical language?” Answer: “God don’t never change.”

Communication is only important because it is the broadest root of education. And all cultures communicate exactly what they have, a powerful motley of experience.

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Chicago's Congo (Frank Marshall Davis)

(Sonata for an Orchestra)

Chicago is an overgrown woman
wearing her skyscrapers
like a necklace ...
Chicago's blood is kaleidoscopic
Chicago's heart has a hundred auricles

* * *

From the Congo
to Chicago
is a long trek
—as the crow flies

Sing to me of a red warrior moon victorious in a Congo sky ... show me a round dollar moon in the
ragged blue purse of Chicago's heavens ... tell me of a hundred spoil laden blacks tramping home from
the raid ... point me out a hundred brown men riding the elevated home on payday ... pick me the winners
... in Chicago? ... in the Congo?

Skyscraper pinnacles rip great holes in the rubber balloon bag of the sky ... do spears kill quicker than
printed words? ... midnight lies and cobra fangs ... ask me if civilization produces new forms of biting and
tearing and killing ... see three million whites and two hundred thousand blacks civilized in Chicago

*From the Congo
to Chicago
is a long trek
—as the crow flies*

* * *

I'm a grownup man today Chicago
My bones are thick and stout
(when I moved to new districts bombings
couldn't break them)
My flesh is smooth and firm
(look—the wounds you give me heal quickly)
See how the muscles ripple under my night-black skin
My strength comes not from resting
You should be proud of me Chicago
I've got a lion's heart and a six-shooter
I've got a fighter's fist and five newspapers
I've got an eye for beauty and another for cash
Nothing you've got I can't have

A song dashes its rhythms in, my face like April rain
My song is a song of steel and bamboo, of brick flats and reed huts, of
steamboats and slim canoes, of murder trials and jackal packs, of con
men and pythons
My tune I get from automobiles and lions roaring, from the rustle of bank-
notes in a teller's window and the rustle of leaves in Transvaal trees
I ask you to find a better song, a louder song, a sweeter song—

Here's something Wagner couldn't do

State Street is a wide gray band across Chicago's forehead
At night a white faced mother moon clothes Skyscrapers in gray silk
At night when clocks yawn and hours get lazy
At night when the jungle's a symphony in grays ...
Oh mother moon, mother of earth, bringer of silver gifts
Bring a veil of stardust to wrap this Congo in
Bring a shawl of moon mist to clothe Chicago's body

* * *

Between the covers of books lie the bones of yesterdays
Today is a new dollar
And
My city is money mad

* * *

Across the street from the Ebenezer Baptist Church, women with cast-iron
faces peddle love
In the flat above William's Funeral Home
 six couples sway to the St. Louis Blues
Two doors away from the South Side Bank
 three penny-brown men scorch their guts with four bit whiskey
Dr. Jackson buys a Lincoln
His neighbor buys second hand, shoes
 —the artist who paints this town must
 use a checkered canvas ...

Tired-looking houses of brown stone
Ramshackle flats with sightless eyes
A surface car throws a handful of white sparks at cracked red bricks
An L train roars oaths at backyard clotheslines
Mornings on South Parkway flats sit like silent cats watching the little
 green mice of buses running up and down the boulevard
And only grass has heard the secrets of vacant lots

* * *

This song has no tune. You cannot hum it.
This song has no words. You cannot sing it.
This song everybody knows, nobody knows.
It is in a pattern of brown faces at the Wabash Y.M.C.A., a 35th Street gam-
bling place, a Parkway theatre—you get it or you don't
It is a melody of everything and nothing

I saw twelve stars sitting along the edge of a four story flat
I saw a moon held by leafless tree fingers
I heard a shot tear huge holes in the blanket of silence
Later—just a little later—the moon got away and the stars stepped back
into the sky

There will always be new wordless songs, new humless tunes
Chicago sings these songs each day
Chicago who wears her skyscrapers like a necklace ...

Frank Marshall Davis, "Chicago's Congo" from *Black Moods: Collected Poems*. Copyright © 2002 by the Trustees of the University of Illinois. Reprinted with the permission of the University of Illinois Press.

Self Portrait (Frank Marshall Davis)

I would be
A painter with words
Creating sharp portraits
On the wide canvas of your mind
Images of those things
Shaped through my eyes
That interest me;
But being a Tenth American
In this democracy
I sometimes sketch a miniature
Though I contract for a mural.

Of course
You understand this democracy;
One man as good as another,
From log cabin to White House,
Poor boy to corporation president,
Hoover and Browder with one vote each,
A free country,
Complete equality—
Yeah—
And the rich get tax refunds,
The poor get relief checks.

As for myself
I pay five cents for a daily synopsis of current history,
Two bits and the late lowdown on Hollywood,
Twist a dial for Stardust or Shostakovich,
And with each bleacher stub I reserve the right to shout "kill the bum" at the umpire—
Wherefore am I different
From nine other Americans?

But listen, you
Don't worry about me
I rate!
I'm Convert 4711 at Beulah Baptist Church,
I'm Social Security No. 337-16-3458 in Washington,
Thank you Mister God and Mister Roosevelt!
And another thing:—
No matter what happens
I too can always call in a policeman!

Frank Marshall Davis, "Self Portrait" from *Black Moods: Collected Poems*. Copyright © 2002 by the Trustees of the University of Illinois. Reprinted with the permission of the University of Illinois Press.

"Legacy" (Amiri Baraka)

(For Blues People)

In the south, sleeping against
the drugstore, growling under
the trucks and stoves, stumbling
through and over the cluttered eyes
of early mysterious night. Frowning
drunk waving moving a hand or lash.
Dancing kneeling reaching out, letting
a hand rest in shadows. Squatting
to drink or pee. Stretching to climb
pulling themselves onto horses near
where there was sea (the old songs
lead you to believe). Riding out
from this town, to another, where
it is also black. Down a road
where people are asleep. Towards
the moon or the shadows of houses.
Towards the songs' pretended sea.

Amiri Baraka, "Legacy" from *Black Magic* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969). Copyright © 1969 by Amiri Baraka. Reprinted with the permission of Sll/Sterling Lord Literistic, Inc.
Source: *Black Magic* (1969)

“When I Think of Tamir Rice While Driving” (Reginald Dwayne Betts)

in the backseat of my car are my own sons,
still not yet Tamir’s age, already having heard
me warn them against playing with toy pistols,
though my rhetoric is always about what I don’t
like, not what I fear, because sometimes
I think of Tamir Rice & shed tears, the weeping
all another insignificance, all another way to avoid
saying what should be said: the Second Amendment
is a ruthless one, the pomp & constitutional circumstance
that says my arms should be heavy with the weight
of a pistol when forced to confront death like
this: a child, a hidden toy gun, an officer that fires
before his heart beats twice. My two young sons play
in the backseat while the video of Tamir dying
plays in my head, & for everything I do know, the thing
I don’t say is that this should not be the brick and mortar
of poetry, the moment when a black father drives
his black sons to school & the thing in the air is the death
of a black boy that the father cannot mention,
because to mention the death is to invite discussion
of taboo: if you touch my sons the crimson
that touches the concrete must belong, at some point,
to you, the police officer who justifies the echo
of the fired pistol; taboo: the thing that says that justice
is a killer’s body mangled and disrupted by bullets
because his mind would not accept the narrative
of your child’s dignity, of his right to life, of his humanity,
and the crystalline brilliance you saw when your boys first breathed;
the narrative must invite more than the children bleeding
on crisp fall days; & this is why I hate it all, the people around me,
the black people who march, the white people who cheer,
the other brown people, Latinos & Asians & all the colors of humanity
that we erase in this American dance around death, as we
are not permitted to articulate the reasons we might yearn
to see a man die; there is so much that has to disappear
for my mind not to abandon sanity: Tamir for instance, everything
about him, even as his face, really and truly reminds me
of my own, in the last photo I took before heading off
to a cell, disappears, and all I have stomach for is blood,
and there is a part of me that wishes that it would go away,
the memories, & that I could abandon all talk of making it right
& justice. But my mind is no sieve & sanity is no elixir & I am bound
to be haunted by the strength that lets Tamir’s father,
mother, kinfolk resist the temptation to turn everything
they see into a grave & make home the series of cells
that so many of my brothers already call their tomb.

Source: *Poetry* (April 2016)

“For the City that Nearly Broke Me” (Reginald Dwayne Betts)

Knots like two dozen fists
swayed with want from the boy's
kaffiyeh, that black and white scarf
with its useless hands clapping
against the wind in protest
against this boy and his somebody
lost, against their own swaying
in a dance the lost body has lost.
A boy. A somebody lost. A body bodied
in the lights of inauguration night
when every light in the city flared
with hope. Always losing, always
a boy left with a dozen weights,
small circles on strings pulling
his head down to the ground.
Downcast. Drop your bucket here
and make the city yours and all
that jive keeps him from running.
Escaping the pavement, where
bodies finally fall to rest.
The kaffiyeh keeps him from
bucking against the wind,
hurtling himself to the Grey-
hound or Amtrak or I-95
with a book bag and hitched finger.
His head shrouded in the black
and white, the knots keeping
his eyes down as he traverses
neighborhoods with names like 3rd
World, with names like a nation
falling. And the coffin-voiced
boy is who god tells us he will
save, and so those swinging knots
must be a kind of redemption,
a way to see the bullets that bury
you, constantly, as if death is
the disguise hiding your wings.

This poem first appeared in *Tikkun Magazine*.
Source: *Poetry* (November 2012)

There Came a Soul (Rita Dove)

After IVAN ALBRIGHT's Into the World There Came a Soul Called Ida

She arrived as near to virginal
as girls got in those days—i.e., young,
the requisite dewy cheek
flushed at its own daring.
He had hoped for a little more edge.
But she held the newspaper rolled like a scepter,
his advertisement turned up to prove
she was there solely at his bidding—and yet
the gold band, the photographs ... a mother, then.

He placed her in the old garden chair,
the same one he went to evenings
when the first tug on the cord sent the bulb
swinging like the lamps in the medic's tent
over the wounded, swaddled shapes that moaned
each time the Screaming Meemies let loose,
their calculated shrieks so far away
he thought of crickets—while all around him
matted gauze and ether pricked up
an itch so bad he could hardly sketch
each clean curve of tissue opening.
I shut my eyes, walk straight to it.
Nothing special but it's there, wicker
fraying under my calming fingers.

What if he changed the newspaper into a letter,
then ripped it up and tucked the best part
from view? How much he needed that desecrated
scrap! And the red comb snarled with a few
pale hairs for God in his infinite greed
to snatch upon like a hawk targeting a sparrow—
he couldn't say *At least I let you keep your hair*
so he kept to his task, applying paint
like a bandage to the open wound.

Pretty Ida, out to earn a penny
for her tiny brood.
He didn't mask the full lips
or the way all the niggling fears
of an adolescent century
shone through her hesitant eyes,
but he painted the room out, blackened
every casement, every canvas drying
along the wall, even the ailing coffeepot
whose dim brew she politely refused,
until she was seated
as he had been, dropped
bleak and thick,
onto the last chair in the world.

The Afterbirth, 1931 (Nikky Finney)

We were a Colored Clan of Kinfolk
Who threw soil not salt
Over our shoulders
Who tendered close the bible
Who grew and passed around the almanac at night
So we would know
What to plant at first light

Black soil and sweet brown sorghum
From the every morning biscuits
Mama Susan fixed
Dripping and mixing
Up under our fingernails
A secret salve
Just like any other
Living simple
And keeping to our proud selves
Quite aware of night riders
Quite aware of men with
Politicious smiles
Cologned with kerosene and match

Aware of just whose feet
Walked across our tin roofs at night

We were such light sleepers
Such long distance believers

We were a family pregnant
Whose water had broke
And for once there was ham money
'Bacca money
So we thought to do better by ourselves
To begin our next row
We would go and get him
Because he was medically degreed in baby bringing
Because he was young and white and handsome
And because of that
Had been neighbor to more knowledge
Than us way back behind
The country's proud but inferior lines

And because he came with his papers in his pocket
So convincing so soon
After his ivy graduation
Asking us hadn't we heard
Telling us times had changed
And the midwife wasn't safe anymore
Even though we had all been caught
By tried and true Black Grannies

Who lay ax blade sharp side up
And water pan underneath the bed
To cut the pain
To cool the fever

We were a Pregnant Clan of Kinfolk
Caught with water running down our legs
Old family say they remember
Going to fetch him
Telling him that it was time
That he should come now
But he didn't show right away
Not right away
But came when he wanted
The next day
After his breakfast

But what more
Could we colored country folk ever want
Even if we had to watch the road all night for him
Even if we had to not let her push too hard
When he finally came
He had his papers on him
Something with one of those pretty shiny seals
Old family say they can remember
Somethin' just wasn't right
But we opened the screen for him anyway
Trusting
And tendering close what the Good Book
Had told us all our lives to do

Then we made him a path
Where he put his hand up then inside
My grandmother's womb
Her precious private pleasing place
Somewhere he probably didn't want to touch

Then he pulled my daddy through
Somebody he probably didn't care to reach for
And from the first he pulled him wrong
And wrong
Shattered his collarbone
And snapped his soft baby foot in half
And smashed the cartilage in his infant hand

Wringing
Their own sun baked arms
Old timey family
Remember him well
Say they knew somethin' wasn't right
As he came through the door

A day later
His breakfast digested now
Somethin' just wasn't right
How he had two waters on him
One sweet one sour-mash
One trying to throw snow quilt over the other
As he un-carefully
As drunkenly
He with his papers on him still
Stood there turning a brown baby into blue
Un-magically
And right before our eyes

Hope and Pray
Hope and Pray

Then he packed his bag and left
With all of his official training
And gathered up gold stars left
The Virginia land of Cumberland County

He left and forgot
He left and didn't remember
The afterbirth inside
Carlene Godwin Finney

To clabber
Gangrene
Close down
Her place
Her precious private pleasing place
To fill the house to the rafters
Up past the dimpled tin roof
With a rotting smell
That stayed for nine days
That mortgaged a room
In our memories
And did not die with her

We were a Brown and Pregnant Family
And he would've remembered his schoolin'
And left his bottle
Recollected his manners
And brought his right mind
Had another klan called him to their bedside
He would've come right away
He would've never had liquor on his breath
If the color of my daddy's broken limbs
Had matched the color of his own but

We were a Colored Clan of Kinfolk

We should've met him at the door
Should've told him *lean first* into the rusty screen
Made him open up his mouth and blow
Breathe out right there
Into all of our brown and lined up faces
In wait of his worthiness

Then just for good measure
Should've made him blow once again
Into Papa Josh's truth telling jar
Just to be sure
Should've let Mama Sally
Then Aunt Nanny
Then lastly Aunt Mary
Give him the final once over
And hold his sterile hands
Down to the firelight to check
Just like she checked our own every night
Before supper
Before we were allowed to sit
At her very particular table

We could've let Aunt Ira clutch him by his chin
Enter and leave through her eyes
Just like how she came and went through us
Everyday at her leisure

She would've took care to notice
As she traveled all up and through him
Any shaking any sweating
And caught his incapable belligerent incompetence
In time

Oh Jesus

We should've let Grandpop Robert
Have him from the first
Should've let him pick him up
By the back of his pants
And swirl him around
Just like he picked us up
And swirled us around
Anytime he caught us lying or lazy
Or being less than what we were

We should've let Grandpop
Loose on him from the start
And he would've held him up
High eye to the sun
And looked straight through him
Just like he held us up

And then we would have known first
Like he always knew first
And brought to us
The very map of his heart
Then we would have known
Just what his intentions were
With our Carlene

Before we knew his name
Or cared about his many degrees
Before he dared reach up then inside
Our family's brown globe
While we stood there
Some of us throwing good black soil
With one hand
Some of us tending close
The Good Book with the other
Believing and trusting
We were doing better
By this one
Standing there

Waterfalls running
Screaming whitewater rapids

Down our pants legs
Down our pantaloons
To our many selves

All the while
Praying hard
That maybe we were wrong
(please make us wrong)
One hundred proof
Smelled the same as
Isopropyl

Nikky Finney, "The Afterbirth, 1931" from *Rice*. Copyright © 1995 by Nikky Finney. Used by permission of the author. Source: *Rice* (Sister Vision Press, 1995)

Chain Gang (Dominique Christina)

This song is not a language,
Not a thing to be remembered,
The field-holler tradition of
Teeth and knees
Cursing wind,
A concert hall of bloody hands
Spilling the earth,
Strangling dirt,
Sledgehammer curses
Of men busted open.

On Parchman Farm
You could hear it coming
Up through the trees,
The hammering pulpit of
Crooning men and sweat,
The tender meat of palms
Pulped like plums.

Them men gulped down the
Dawn dew air,
Let it catch in their throats,
Broke the sunrise up and
Sang hymns like hexes:

Be my woman gal, I'll beeee your maaaaaaan ...

And the killing fields of Mississippi
Fizzled down to juke joints and
The hothouse music of illegal clubs
With thick women they loved outright and
Played cards with and
Gave bourbon to when their hands
Didn't hold sorrow like
Pickaxes and the railroad was
Just a railroad,
A way to ride north if you could
Get your money right.

Redbone gals with rosewater sweat,
When they lifted their knees
Sunflower County was a heaven
They believed in.

Stick to the promise, gal, that you maaaaaade meeeeee ...

Steady now,
They turned back the clock on
Their hard, hard hands,
Let the memory of fresh linen and

Ladies' slips like gossamer
Wings, a parade of plump thighs,
The juju thrust of furious bones
Spread like grease
Across starched-white sheets,
Midwife them out of ol' Parchman Farm

And back to the cockfights and gambling,
Back when they had ambition,
Back when they had a sweet woman
To hold, her fat wrists
Soft as butter,
Limp as rain.

When she walk, she reel and rock beeeeeehind
Ain't that enough to make a convict smiiiiiiiile.

Mississippi's where the cock crowed,
A hoodwink if ever there was one,
But see how a man can make a
Steeple outta his hands,

See how he can break away
From his hurt and be God
If he wants to,
How he can keep his mind
Wrapped in yesterday,
Drown out memory
Like rain drumming
Down like hornets
Yeahhhhhh.

Them Parchman men,
Ants in single file,
Draft dodgers
Digging trenches
Pounding concrete
Laying tracks
Pretending it's Christmas
So they can keep their hands
Away from the colic of axe handles,
The sputtering earth
Snarling under their feet.
Warden says every man
Gotta pay his way on Parchman Farm
Same as the outside.

Yessuh. They remember what it was like to be a man,
To know that didn't mean put a gun in your hand
Or go lookin' for somebody to take down, naw.
They sang 'til the hurt was just an

Experiment in forgetfulness and they
Were back in clean clothes makin' plans and

Tryin' to get a little money
To buy tobacco and
A pint with a little left over
To get somethin' sweet
For the women who were wet
Underneath them, crooning
A tumorless midnight.

The moans of wild women
Are specific:
A whisper of hell danced pink
By the rosewater sweat and mewling,
Questions they ask when
Their clothes are off.

When you gon' take me to the movies?
We goin' Saturday, baby
When you gon' get you a steady job?
Workin' on it everyday, baby
Why you love me anyway, man?
Ain't a man alive who could help it

The dance, you know, the dance of being a free man
That never shows its fullness to you 'til
It's stripped down and gobbled up
By railroad tracks and guards in high towers
With rifles watching your back,
Bend to question mark
Under a sun that won't mind its business,

When the only part of your living life left
Is in the things you remember
About a woman who hung
Pantyhose off her porch to
Dry and made you peach cobbler
In the middle of the night
If you asked nice and
Danced with you to songs
Written on the back of a
Watermelon truck by folk who
Knew something about longing,
And those are the songs you give her now
While you bust the earth open.

Cuz your heart is a burial plot
So stony.

Can't ask nothin' of a grave.

Everybody knows that.

So you dig and
Pound and
Snatch and
Haul and
Scrape and
Lift and
Tote and
Hammer.

Lay it down, man!
Pick it up again, man!

You're knuckles and
Dreams deferred in a place
Where every stone,
Every goddamn stone
Is important!

I go free, lawd, I gooooooooo free ...

Poetry (2016)

I used to be a roller coaster girl (jessica Care moore)
(for Ntozake Shange)

I used to be a roller coaster girl
7 times in a row
No vertigo in these skinny legs
My lipstick bubblegum pink
As my panther 10 speed.

never kissed

Nappy pigtails, no-brand gym shoes
White lined yellow short-shorts

Scratched up legs pedaling past borders of
humus and baba ganoush
Masjids and liquor stores
City chicken, pepperoni bread
and superman ice cream
Cones.

Yellow black blending with bits of Arabic
Islam and Catholicism.

My daddy was Jesus
My mother was quiet
Jayne Kennedy was worshipped
by my brother Mark

I don't remember having my own bed before 12.
Me and my sister Lisa shared.

Sometimes all three Moore girls slept in the Queen.

You grow up so close
never close enough.

I used to be a roller coaster girl
Wild child full of flowers and ideas
Useless crushes on polish boys
in a school full of white girls.

Future black swan singing
Zeppelin, U2 and Rick Springfield

Hoping to be Jessie's Girl

I could outrun my brothers and
Everybody else to that

reoccurring line

I used to be a roller coaster girl
Till you told me I was moving too fast
Said my rush made your head spin
My laughter hurt your ears

A scream of happiness
A whisper of freedom
Pouring out my armpits
Sweating up my neck

You were always the scared one
I kept my eyes open for the entire trip
Right before the drop I would brace myself
And let that force push my head back into

That hard iron seat

My arms nearly fell off a few times
Still, I kept running back to the line
When I was done
Same way I kept running back to you

I used to be a roller coaster girl
I wasn't scared of mountains or falling
Hell, I looked forward to flying and dropping
Off this earth and coming back to life

every once in a while

I found some peace in being out of control
allowing my blood to race
through my veins for 180 seconds

I earned my sometime nicotine pull
I buy my own damn drinks & the ocean
Still calls my name when it feels my toes
Near its shore.

I still love roller coasters
& you grew up to be
Afraid
of all girls who cld
ride

Fearlessly

like
me.