

AN AFRO-AMERICAN CHAPBOOK

Edited by Michael Harper

Chapbook 15

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THE CAGE ALIVE WITH VIBRATIONS

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

M. Evans

FOUR POEMS**The Assassin's Poem**

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

Our Story

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

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

Poopie's Note

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

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

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

The Ring

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

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

Isaac J. Black

NIA: A CELEBRATION OF PURPOSE

(for Alice)

At Round Hill Beach

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

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

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

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

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

Blue Milk and Black Diamonds

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

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

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

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

Lactogen Syndrome :

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

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

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

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

In Your Red Darkroom

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

Nia

You

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

Benin moon sign face.

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

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

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

The crescent smile is gone.

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

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

the lifeline ran from wedding band
to wristwatch. Above

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

moonlight unrolled
ancient scrolls of water
containing all our names

and your water broke
with *Nia*.

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

awe. Now

you cry for beamed moon juice
in this dark room.

Nia, Nia.

Herispapa'spoopoo;
herishimfudgepudge : Nia,

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

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

Purpose I pronounce your blood-red name.

Everett Hoagland

THE SUBJECT OF THE BLUES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nate Johnson

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

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

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

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

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

In A Mist*Bix Beiderbecke, 1927*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Al Young

THREE POEMS**Blazing Accusation**

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

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

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

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

Love on the Cape

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nuptial Calendar

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

FIVE POEMS

Getting Rocks

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

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

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

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

Hungry Travel

1.

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

"Everything lost in the flames,"
he tells my mother. "I don't know
how to give any more."

He takes her like the mule,
riding groin shotgun
back to Carolina cinders.

2.

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

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

3.

This poem for five of us
pulling from one chain.
Our metallic cries etch the hearthstone.
Wet bandages fall from our empty mouths.

We hunger for any words that cure.