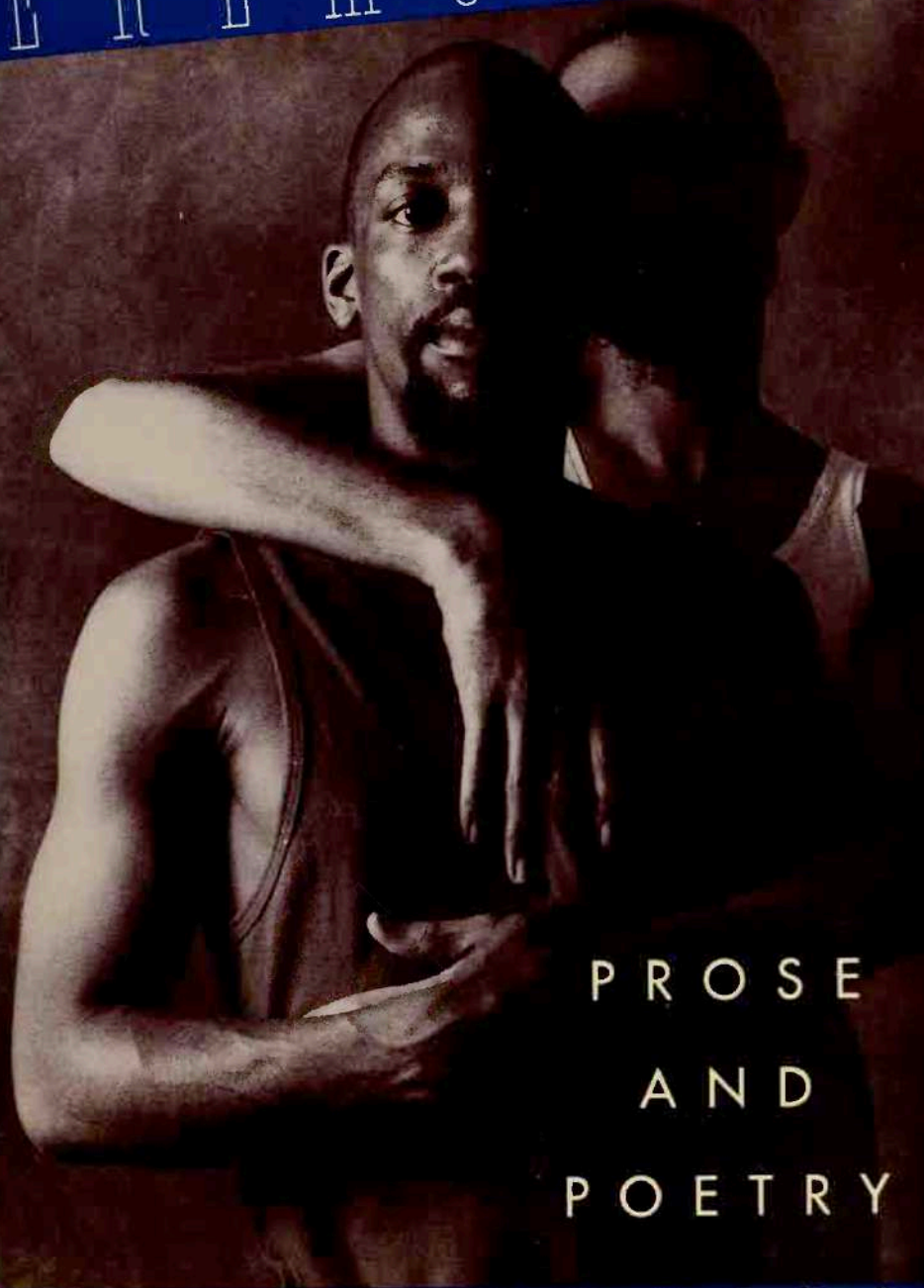


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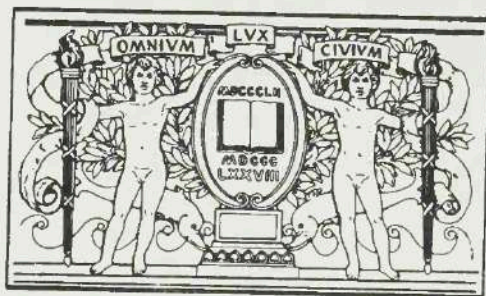
PROSE
AND
POETRY

5

X H E M P H I L L

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DISCOVER ESSEX HEMPHILL ON . . .

LOVE

"You wanna sleep on my chest?/You wanna listen to my heart beat/all through the night?/It's the only jazz station with a twenty-four-hour signal,/if you wanna listen." (p. 139)

THE GAY COMMUNITY

"Open fraternizing at a level suggesting companionship or love between the races was not tolerated in the light of day. Terms such as 'dinge queen,' for white men who prefer Black men, and 'snow queen,' for Black men who prefer white men, were created by a gay community that obviously could not be trusted to believe its own rhetoric concerning brotherhood, fellowship, and dignity." (p. 40)

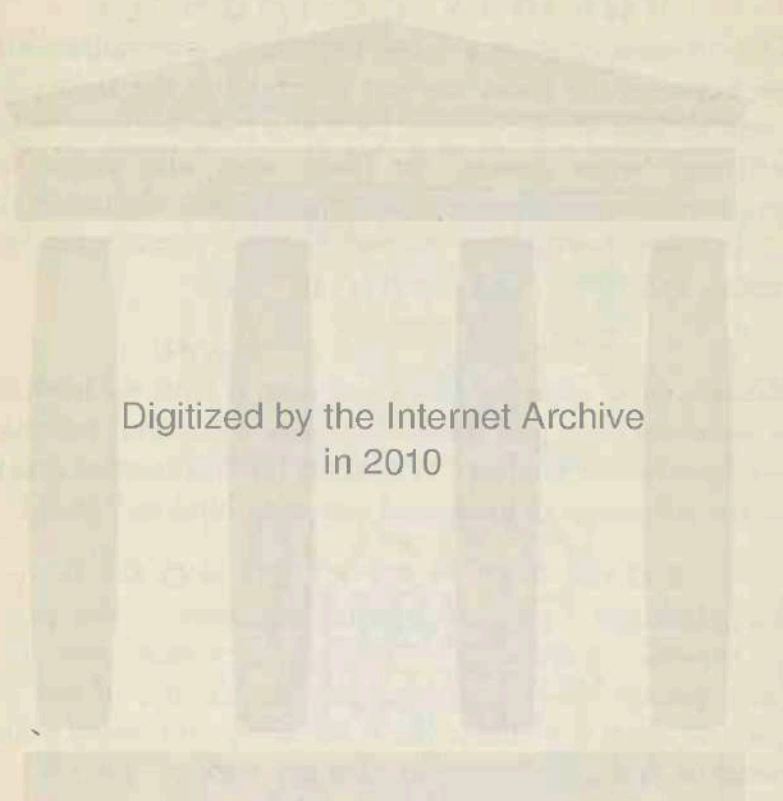
BLACK GAY MEN

"What is most clear for Black gay men is this: we have to do for ourselves *now*, and for one another *now*, what no one has ever done for us. We have to be there for one another and trust less the adhesions of kisses and semen to bind us." (p. 41)

ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE

"Mapplethorpe's eye pays special attention to the penis at the expense of showing us the subject's face, and thus, a whole person. The penis becomes *the* identity of the Black male, which is the classic racist stereotype recreated and presented as Art in the context of a gay vision." (p. 38)

ESSEX HEMPHILL is a writer, poet, and cultural activist. He is well known through his participation in the Black gay films *Looking for Langston*, *Out of the Shadows*, and *Tongues Untied*, which aired on PBS in the summer of 1991. He is the editor of *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* and the author of two books of poetry, *Earth Life* and *Conditions*. He lives in Philadelphia.



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ESSEX HEMPHILL

CEREMONIES

Prose and Poetry



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ONE

AMERICAN HERO

I have nothing to lose tonight.
All my men surround me, panting,
as I spin the ball above our heads
on my middle finger.
It's a shimmering club light
and I'm dancing, slick in my sweat.
Squinting, I aim at the hole
fifty feet away. I let the tension go.
Shoot for the net. Choke it.
I never hear the ball
slap the backboard. I slam it
through the net. The crowd goes wild
for our win. I scored
thirty-two points this game
and they love me for it.
Everyone hollering
is a friend tonight.
But there are towns,
certain neighborhoods
where I'd be hard pressed
to hear them cheer
if I move on the block.

HEAVY BREATHING

*. . . and the Negro every day lower, more cowardly, more sterile,
less profound, more spent beyond himself, more separate from
himself, more cunning with himself, less straight to himself,*

I accept, I accept it all . . .

—AIMÉ CÉSAIRE

"Return to My Native Land"

At the end of heavy breathing,
very little of my focus intentional,
I cross against the light of Mecca.
I recall few instances of piety
and strict obedience.
Nationalism disillusioned me.
My reflections can be traced
to protest slogans
and enchanted graffiti.
My sentiments—whimsical—
the dreams of a young, yearning bride.
Yes, I possess a mouth such as hers:
red, petulant, brutally pouting;
or at times I'm insatiable—
the vampire in the garden, demented
by the blood of a succulent cock.
I prowl in scant sheaths of latex.
I harbor no shame.
I solicit no pity.
I celebrate my natural tendencies,
photosynthesis, erotic customs.
I allow myself to dream of roses

though I know
the bloody war continues.

I am only sure of this:
I continue to awaken
in a rumpled black suit.
Pockets bulging with tools
and ancestral fossils.
A crusty wool suit
with salt on its collar.
I continue to awaken
shell-shocked, wondering
where I come from
beyond mother's womb,
father's sperm.
My past may be lost
beyond the Carolinas
North and South.
I may not recognize
the authenticity
of my Negritude,
so slowly I awaken.

Science continues
dismantling chromosomes.
Tampering with genetic codes.
I am sure of this
as I witness Washington
change its eye color
from brown to blue;
what kind of mutants are we now?
Why is some destruction so beautiful?

*Do you think I could walk pleasantly
and well-suited toward annihilation?*

with a scrotal sack full
of primordial loneliness
swinging between my legs
like solid bells?

I am eager to burn
this threadbare masculinity,
this perpetual black suit
I have outgrown.

At the end of heavy breathing,
at the beginning of grief and terror,
on the X2, the bus I call a slave ship.
The majority of its riders Black.
Pressed to journey to Northeast,
into voodoo ghettos
festering on the knuckles
of the "Negro Dream."

The X2 is a risky ride.
A cargo of block boys, urban pirates,
the Colt 45 and gold-neck-chain-crew
are all part of this voyage,
like me, rooted to something here.

The women usually sit
at the front.
The unfortunate ones
who must ride in the back
with the fellas
often endure foul remarks;
the fellas are quick to call them
out of name, as if all females
between eight and eighty
are simply pussies with legs.

■ ■ ■
The timid men, scattered among
the boat crew and crack boys,
the frightened men
pretend invisibility
or fake fraternity
with a wink or nod.
Or they look the other way.
They have a sister on another bus,
a mother on some other train
enduring this same treatment.

There is never any protest.
No peer restraint. No control.
No one hollered STOP!
for Mrs. Fuller,
a Black mother murdered
in an alley near home.
Her rectum viciously raped
with a pipe. Repeatedly
sodomized repeatedly
sodomized before a crowd
that did not holler stop!
Some of those watching knew her.
Knew her children.
Knew she was a member of the block.
Every participant was Black.
Every witness was Black.
Some were female
and Black.

There was no white man nearby shouting
"BLACK MAN, SHOVE IT IN HER ASS!
TAKE SOME CRACK! SHOVE IT IN HER ASS,
AND THE REST OF YOU WATCH!"
■ ■ ■

At the end of heavy breathing
the funerals of my brothers
force me to wear
this scratchy black suit.

I should be naked,
seeding their graves.

*I go to the place
where the good feelin' awaits me
self-destruction in my hand,*
kneeling over a fucking toilet,
splattering my insides
in a stinking, shit-stained bowl.
I reduce loneliness to cheap green rum,
spicy chicken, glittering vomit.

*I go to the place
where danger awaits me,*
cake-walking
a precarious curb
on a corner
where the absence of doo wop
is frightening.
The evidence of war
and extinction surround me.
I wanted to stay warm
at the bar,
play to the mischief,
the danger beneath a mustache.
The drag queen's perfume
lingers in my sweater
long after she dances
out of the low-rent light,
the cheap shots and catcalls
that demean bravery.

And though the room
is a little cold and shabby,

the music grating,
the drinks a little weak,
we are here
witnessing the popular one
in every boy's town.
A diva by design.
Giving us silicone titties
and dramatic lip synch.
We're crotch to ass,
shoulder to shoulder,
buddy to buddy,
squeezed in sleaze.
We want her to work us.
We throw money
at her feet.
We want her
to work us,
let us see
the naked ass of truth.
We whistle for it,
applaud, shout vulgarities.
We dance like beasts
near the edge of light,
choking drinks.
Clutching money.
And here I am,
 flying high
 without ever leaving the ground
three rums firing me up.
The floor swirling.
Music thumping at my temple.
 In the morning
 I'll be all right.
 I know I'm hooked on the boy
 who makes slaves out of men.
 ■ ■ ■

I'm an oversexed
well-hung
Black Queen
influenced
by phrases like
"the repetition
of beauty."

And you want me to sing
"We Shall Overcome"?
Do you daddy daddy
do you want me to coo
for your approval?
Do you want me
to squeeze my lips together
and suck you in?
Will I be a "brother" then?

I'm an oversexed
well-hung
Black Queen
influenced
by phrases like
"I am the love that dare not
speak its name."

And you want me to sing
"We Shall Overcome"?
Do you daddy daddy
do you want me to coo
for your approval?
Do you want me
to open my hole
and pull you in?
Will I be "visible" then?

■ ■ ■

I'm an oversexed
well-hung
Black Queen
influenced
by phrases like
"Silence = death."

Dearly Beloved,
my flesh like all flesh
will be served
at the feast of worms.
I am looking
for signs of God
as I sodomize my prayers.
I move in and out of love
and pursuits of liberty,
spoon-fed on hypocrisy.
I throw up gasoline
and rubber bullets,
an environmental reflex.
Shackled to shimmy and sham,
I jam the freeway
with my vertigo. I return
to the beginning, to the opening of time
and wounds. I dance
in the searchlight
of a police cruiser.
I know I don't live *here* anymore
but I remain in this body
to witness.

I have been in the bathroom weeping
as silently as I could.
I don't want to alarm
the other young men.
It wasn't always this way.

I used to grin.
I used to dance.
The streets weren't always
slick with blood,
sick with drugs.
My life seems to be
marked down
for quick removal
from the shelf.
When I fuck
the salt tastes sweet.

At the end of heavy breathing
for the price of the ticket
we pay dearly, don't we darling?
Searching for evidence
of things not seen.
I am looking
for Giovanni's room
in this bathhouse.
I know he's here.

I cruise a black maze,
my white sail blowing full.
I wind my way through corridors
lined with identical doors
left ajar, slammed shut,
or thrown open to the dark.
Some rooms are lit and empty,
their previous tenant
soon-to-be-wiped-away,
then another will arrive
with towels and sheets.

We buy time here
so we can fuck each other.

Everyone hasn't gone to the moon.
Some of us are still here,
breathing heavy,
navigating this deadly
sexual turbulence;
perhaps we are
the unlucky ones.

Occasionally I long
for a dead man
I never slept with.
I saw you one night
in a dark room
caught in the bounce of light
from the corridor.
You were intent
on throwing dick
into the depths
of a squirming man
bent to the floor,
blood rushing
to both your heads.

I wanted to give you
my sweet man pussy,
but you grunted me away
and all other Black men
who tried to be near you.
Our beautiful nigga lips and limbs
stirred no desire in you.
Instead you chose blonde,
milk-toned creatures to bed.
But you were still one of us,
dark like us, despised like us.

■ ■ ■

Occasionally I long
to fuck a dead man
I never slept with.
I pump up my temperature
imagining his touch
as I stroke my wishbone,
wanting to raise him up alive,
wanting my fallen seed
to produce him full-grown
and breathing heavy
when it shoots
across my chest;
wanting him upon me,
alive and aggressive,
intent on his sweet buggery
even if my eyes do
lack a trace of blue.

At the end of heavy breathing
the fire quickly diminishes.
Proof dries on my stomach.
I open my eyes, regret
I returned without my companion,
who moments ago held my nipple
bitten between his teeth,
as I thrashed about
on the mercy of his hand
whimpering in tongues.

At the end of heavy breathing
does it come to this?
Filtering language of necessity?
Stripping it of honesty?
Burning it with fissures
that have nothing to do with God?
The absolute evidence of place.

A common roof, discarded
rubbers, umbrellas,
the scratchy disc of memory.
The fatal glass slipper.
The sublimations
that make our erections falter.

At the end of heavy breathing
who will be responsible
for the destruction of human love?
Who are the heartless
sons of bitches
sucking blood from dreams
as they are born?
Who has the guts
to come forward
and testify?
Who will save
our sweet world?

We were promised
this would be a nigga fantasy
on the scale of Oz.
Instead we're humiliated,
disenchanted, suspicious.
I ask the scandal-infested leadership
"What is your malfunction? Tell us
how your automatic weapons
differ from the rest."

They respond with hand jive,
hoodoo hollering,
excuses to powder the nose,
or they simply disappear
like large sums of money.

■ ■ ■

And you want me to give you
a mandatory vote
because we are both Black
and descendants of oppression?
What will I get in return?
Hush money from the recreation fund?
A kilo of cocaine?
A boy for my bed
and a bimbo for my arm?
A tax break on my new home
west of the ghetto?

You promised
this would be a nigga fantasy
on the scale of Oz.
Instead, it's "Birth of a Nation"
and the only difference
is the white men
are played in Blackface.

At the end of heavy breathing
as the pickaninny frenzy escalates,
the home crew is illin'
on freak drugs
and afflicted racial pride.
The toll beyond counting,
the shimmering carcasses
all smell the same.
No matter which way
the wind blows
I lose a god
or a friend.

My grieving is too common
to arouse the glance of angels.
My shame is too easy to pick up

like a freak from the park
and go.

Urged to honor paranoia,
trained to trust a dream,
a reverend, hocus-pocus
handshakes; I risk becoming schizoid
shuffling between Black English
and assimilation.

My dreamscape is littered
with effigies of my heroes.

I journey across
my field of vision
raiding the tundra
of my imagination.

Three African rooftops
are aflame in my hand.
Compelled by desperation,
I plunder every bit of love
in my possession.

I am looking for an answer
to drugs and corruption.
I enter the diminishing
circumstance of prayer.

Inside a homemade Baptist church
perched on the edge
of the voodoo ghetto,
the murmurs of believers
rise and fall, exhaled
from a single spotted lung.

The congregation sings
to an out-of-tune piano
while death is rioting,
splashing blood about
like gasoline,
offering pieces of rock

in exchange
for throw-away dreams.

The lines of takers are long.

Now is the time
to be an undertaker
in the ghetto,
a black dress seamstress.
Now is not the time
to be a Black mother
in the ghetto,
the father of sons,
the daughters of any of them.

At the end of heavy breathing
I engage in arguments
with my ancestral memories.
I'm not content
with nationalist propaganda.
I'm not content
loving my Black life
without question.
The answers of Negritude
are not absolute.
The dream of King
is incomplete.
I probe beneath skin surface.
I argue with my nappy hair,
my thick lips so difficult
to assimilate.
Up and down the block we battle,
cussing, kicking, screaming,
threatening to kill
with bare hands.

■ ■ ■

At the end of heavy breathing
the dream deferred
is in a museum
under glass and guard.
It costs five dollars
to see it on display.
We spend the day
viewing artifacts,
breathing heavy
on the glass
to see—
the skeletal remains
of black panthers,
pictures of bushes,
canisters of tears.

VISITING HOURS

The government pays me
nine thousand dollars a year
to protect the East Wing.
So I haunt it.

Visiting hours are over.
The silent sentry is on duty.
An electric eye patrols the premises.
I'm just here
putting mouth on the place.

Modigliani whispers to Matisse.
Matisse whispers to Picasso.
I kiss the Rose in my pocket
and tip easy through this tomb of thieves.

I'm weighted down with keys,
flashlight, walkie-talkie, a gun.
I'm expected to die, if necessary,
protecting European artwork
that robbed color and movement
from my life.

I'm the ghost in the Capitol.
I did Vietnam.
My head is rigged with land mines,
but I keep cool,
waiting on every other Friday,

kissing the Rose,
catching some trim.

I'm not protecting any more Europeans
with my life.

I'll give this shit in here away
before I die for it.
Fuck a Rembrandt!

And if I ever go off,
you'd better look out, Mona Lisa.
I'll run through this gallery
with a can of red enamel paint
and spray everything in sight
like a cat in heat.

CIVIL SERVANT

FOR NURSE EUNICE RIVERS

I could perform my job no other way:
obey instructions or be dismissed,
which would end my nursing career.
I was a Colored nurse,
special, one of few.
I didn't question the authority
the government doctors exercised over me.
Their control of life and death
and my sense of duty and responsibility
were parallel and reciprocating.
My father, Tuskegee Institute, and Dr. Dibble
had trained me to obey
the instructions of white men,
and all men.
I didn't talk back,
raise my voice in protest,
or demand the doctors save the men.
It wasn't my place to diagnose,
prescribe, or agitate.

When the doctors told me
to prevent the men
from getting treatment elsewhere,
I did. I supplied their names
to all county health officials.
They agreed to withhold treatment
even after penicillin was discovered
to be an effective cure for bad blood.

■ ■ ■
The government doctors
viewed the men
as syphilis experiments.
I troubled myself
to remember their names.
I visited their homes
between annual checkups
to listen to their hearts
and feel their pulses.
They had aches and pains
and complaints too numerous to name,
but I soothed them. I tried.
I gave them spring tonic
for their blood.
I couldn't give them medicine.
I tried to care for everyone
including the women,
the old folks, and children.
I became an adopted member
of many of the families I visited.
I ate at their tables,
sat at their sickbeds,
mourned at their funerals.
I married one of their sons.

I never thought my duty
damned the men.
They were sick with bad blood,
but I thought they were lucky.
Most Colored folks in Macon
went from cradle to grave
without ever visiting a doctor.
The ones with bad blood were envied
because they received free

medical attention, food,
and rides to the health sites
come checkup time.

As the men died, I wept
with their wives and families.
I was there to comfort them,
to offer fifty dollars
if they let the doctors
“operate”—
cut open the deceased
from scrotum sack to skull.
They were usually horrified
by my offer,
fearing disfigurement
or the courting of blasphemy.
I assured them no one would know
that their hearts and brains
had been removed.
I suggested fifty dollars
could cover burial costs
and buy unexpected food
and clothes.

I never thought my silence
a symptom of bad blood.
I never considered my care complicity.
I was a Colored nurse, a proud
graduate of Tuskegee Institute,
one of few, honored by my profession.
I had orders, important duties,
a government career.

VOICES

IN MEMORY OF WILLIAM DELOACH, AGE FIVE

My hands disappear
gloved in crimson flames.
They drip like wax
with your blood
burning the floor.
Nothing about this alarms me.
Nothing appears unusual.

I open the refrigerator
and place your head
on the top shelf.
Blood streaks
the white-shelled eggs below.
The voices of my waking world,
the captors of my sleep
are satisfied. Silent.
They are leaving
as I wax the kitchen floor
for the seventh time.

Over many months
the voices spoke to me.
As I tried to sleep,
when I rode the bus
or shopped for food
they were with me.
I tried to flee
but the voices pursued.
No drug soothed me.

no doctor could hear
what I heard.
The voices wanted me
to free my son
from his breed
and complexion.
"Too dark to live!"
They implored.
I should have kept him
in my womb.
I don't hear his screams
when I close the refrigerator.

The evening the voices demanded,
"Deliver him—now!"
I withdrew the meat knife.
I called him to the kitchen
and beckoned him into my arms
to kiss me.
I slit his throat
as he tip-toed up
to put his lips to mine.
I licked his sweet blood
from my hands and blade.
I carved his heart from his chest
and hid it from a thief named God.

Nothing about this alarmed me.
No, nothing appeared unusual,
Your Honor.

FOR MY OWN PROTECTION

I want to start
an organization
to save my life.
If whales, snails,
dogs, cats,
Chrysler, and Nixon
can be saved,
the lives of Black men
are priceless
and can be saved.
We should be able
to save each other.
I don't want to wait
for the Heritage Foundation
to release a study
stating Black men
are almost extinct.
I don't want to be
the living dead
pacified with drugs
and sex.

If a human chain
can be formed
around missile sites,
then surely Black men
can form human chains
around Anacostia, Harlem,

South Africa, Wall Street,
Hollywood, each other.

If we have to take tomorrow
with our blood are we ready?
Do our S curls,
dreadlocks, and Phillies
make us any more ready
than a bush or conkoline?
I'm not concerned
about the attire of a soldier.
All I want to know
for my own protection
is are we capable
of whatever,
whenever?

TWO

WHEN MY BROTHER FELL

FOR JOSEPH BEAM

When my brother fell
I picked up his weapons
and never once questioned
whether I could carry
the weight and grief,
the responsibility he shouldered.
I never questioned
whether I could aim
or be as precise as he.
He had fallen,
and the passing ceremonies
marking his death
did not stop the war.

Standing at the front lines
flanked by able brothers
who miss his eloquent courage,
his insistent voice
urging us to rebel,
urging us to not fear embracing
for more than sex,
for more than kisses
and notches in our belts.

Our loss is greater
than all the space
we fill with prayers
and praise.

He burned out
his pure life force
to bring us dignity,
to bring us a chance
to love ourselves
with commitment.
He knew the simple
spilling of seed
would not be enough
to bind us.

It is difficult
to stop marching, Joseph,
impossible to stop our assault.
The tributes and testimonies
in your honor
flare up like torches.
Every night
a light blazes for you
in one of our hearts.

There was no one lonelier
than you, Joseph.
Perhaps you wanted love
so desperately and pleaded
with God for the only mercy
that could be spared.
Perhaps God knew
you couldn't be given
more than public love
in this lifetime.

When I stand
on the front lines now,
cussing the lack of truth,
the absence of willful change

and strategic coalitions,
I realize sewing quilts
will not bring you back
nor save us.

It's too soon
to make monuments
for all we are losing,
for the lack of truth
as to why we are dying,
who wants us dead,
what purpose does it serve?

When my brother fell
I picked up his weapons.
I didn't question
whether I could aim
or be as precise as he.
A needle and thread
were not among
his things
I found.

FIXIN' THINGS

FOR CHARLES

I give you snatches of my boyhood
in exchange for pictures of yours.
Often you voice difficult memories
that I keep silent regarding home.

In retrospect, it wasn't the sound
of my mother crying that hurt most,
it was the sound of my father leaving
his marriage, his house, his familiars.

In the debris of ruptured bloodlines,
in the domestic violence of our families,
in the turbulence we call love was bred
the possibility of my dysfunction, and yours.

I tell you of the hatred
that seized the boyhoods
of my brother and me,
how we fought violently in public,

drawing blood as if it would
allow us to see
what was wrong with it,
with him, with me.

We are men now, he with a family;
I have a cat and a thousand poems.
We have accepted what we can of ourselves:
my homo life, his hyper masculinity, the same difference.

How does the world see my brother?
How is he treated, how is he approached?
What dreams does he keep from childhood?
What does he look like as a father?

I know little of this about him
as I rush from airports to hotels to podiums.
I know little of this as I go about
publicly advocating for Black brotherhood.

So when I am with you, my friend,
and we open our hearts to one another,
I wonder why I have never
done this with my blood brother?

You and I afford ourselves the space to release
the anguish; across a simple kitchen table
we examine scars, we teach ourselves to make power
and beauty of scars, a skill we learn with great effort.

Why I have never created such a space
for speaking to my brother, and how to now,
now as I move toward the middle years
losing more than I gain to live.

How to address this is the dream that eludes my blue nights.
O sweet dream, when will you come to me with answers?
Must I beg? Of the many issues that concern me,
how to speak to my brother is a mystery.

Is it a new language we must learn?
Is it a miracle sign that foretells of us
speaking in tongues and finally understanding?
These are the elusive questions that foil me.

■ ■ ■
Why are we unable to say this
to our blood brothers, share this with them,
across a common table touch, create
a trusted fellowship, why can't we?

Why is the world always easier to fix
than our own homes?

DOES YOUR MAMA KNOW ABOUT ME?

THROUGHOUT THE 1980S, MANY OF US GRIEVED THE LOSS OF friends, lovers, and relatives who were one moment strong, healthy, and able-bodied, but then in an instant they became thin-framed, emaciated, hacking and wheezing, their bodies wracked with horrible pain. Sometimes brave souls would return to the family roost to disclose their sexuality and ask permission to die in familiar surroundings. Too often, families were discovering for the first time that the dear brother, the favorite uncle, the secretive son was a homosexual, a Black gay man, and the unfortunate victim of the killer virus, AIDS. Some parents had always known and some had never suspected that their son was a Black gay man, a sissy, a queer, a faggot. For some families this shocking discovery and grief expressed itself as shame and anger; it compelled them to disown their flesh and blood, denying dying men the love and support that friends often provided as extended family. In other instances families were very understanding and bravely stood by their brethren through their final days.

Joseph Beam, in his powerful essay "Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart," from *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1986), defined *home* as being larger, more complex and encompassing than one's living room:

When I speak of home, I mean not only the familial constellation from which I grew, but the entire Black community: the Black press, the Black church, Black academicians, the Black literati, and the Black left. Where is my reflection? I am most

often rendered invisible, perceived as a threat to the family, or I am tolerated if I am silent and inconspicuous. I cannot go home as who I am and that hurts me deeply (p. 231).

Beam articulated one of the primary issues Black gay men are faced with when our relationships with our families and communities are examined. We cannot afford to be disconnected from these institutions, yet it would seem that we are willing to create and accept dysfunctional roles in them, roles of caricature, silence, and illusion. In truth, we are often forced into these roles to survive. This critical dilemma causes some of us to engage in dishonest relationships with our kin. It can foster apathy between us and the communities of home that we need and that need our presence. The contradictions of "home" are amplified and become more complex when Black gay men's relationships with the white gay community are also examined.

The post-Stonewall white gay community of the 1980s was not seriously concerned with the existence of Black gay men except as sexual objects. In media and art the Black male was given little representation except as a big, Black dick. This aspect of the white gay sensibility is strikingly revealed in the photographs of Black males by the late Robert Mapplethorpe. Though his images may be technically and esthetically well-composed, his work *artistically* perpetuates racial stereotypes constructed around sexuality and desire. In many of his images, Black males are only shown as parts of the anatomy—genitals, chests, buttocks—close up and close cropped to elicit desire. Mapplethorpe's eye pays special attention to the penis at the expense of showing us the subject's face, and thus, a whole person. The penis becomes *the* identity of the Black male, which is the classic racist stereotype recreated and presented as Art in the context of a gay vision.

Mapplethorpe's "Man in a Polyester Suit," for exam-

ple, presents a Black man without a head, wearing a business suit, his trousers unzipped, and his fat, long penis dangling down, a penis that is not erect. It can be assumed that many viewers who appreciate Mapplethorpe's work, and who construct sexual fantasies from it, probably wondered *first* how much larger would the penis become during erection, as opposed to wondering *who* is the man in the photo or *why* is his head missing? What is insulting and endangering to Black men is Mapplethorpe's *conscious* determination that the faces, the heads, and by extension, the minds and experiences of some of his Black subjects are not as important as close-up shots of their cocks.

It is virtually impossible while viewing Mapplethorpe's photos of Black males to avoid confronting issues of exploitation and objectification. Additionally, Black gay men are not immune to the desire elicited by his photos. We, too, are drawn to the inherent eroticism. In "True Confessions: A Discourse on Images of Black Male Sexuality" (*Ten-8*, No. 22, 1986), Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer accurately identify this dichotomy when they observe that Mapplethorpe's images of Black males reiterate "the terms of colonial fantasy" and "service the expectations of white desire." They then ask the most critical question of all: "What do [Mapplethorpe's images] say to our wants and desires as Black gay men (p. 6)?"

It has not fully dawned on white gay men that racist conditioning has rendered many of them no different from their heterosexual brothers in the eyes of Black gays and lesbians. Coming out of the closet to confront sexual oppression has not necessarily given white males the motivation or insight to transcend their racist conditioning. This failure (or reluctance) to transcend is costing the gay and lesbian community the opportunity to become a powerful force for creating *real* social changes that reach beyond issues of sexuality. It has fostered much of the distrust that permeates the relations between the Black and white commu-

nities. And finally, it erodes the possibility of forming meaningful, powerful coalitions.

When Black gay men approached the gay community to participate in the struggle for acceptance and to forge bonds of brotherhood, bonds so loftily proclaimed as *the vision* of the best gay minds of my generation, we discovered that the beautiful rhetoric was empty. The disparity between words and actions was as wide as the Atlantic Ocean and deeper than Dante's hell. There was no "gay" community for Black men to come home to in the 1980s. The community we found was as mythical and distant from the realities of Black men as was Oz from Kansas.

At the baths, certain bars, in bookstores and cruising zones, Black men were welcome because these constructions of pleasure allowed the races to mutually explore sexual fantasies, and, after all, the Black man engaging in such a construction only needed to whip out a penis of almost any size to obtain the rapt attention withheld from him in other social and political structures of the gay community. These sites of pleasure were more tolerant of Black men because they enhanced the sexual ambiance, but that same tolerance did not always continue once the sun began to rise.

Open fraternizing at a level suggesting companionship or love between the races was not tolerated in the light of day. Terms such as "dinge queen," for white men who prefer Black men, and "snow queen," for Black men who prefer white men, were created by a gay community that obviously could not be trusted to believe its own rhetoric concerning brotherhood, fellowship, and dignity. Only an *entire* community's silence, complicity, and racial apathy is capable of reinforcing these conditions.

Some of the best minds of my generation would have us believe that AIDS has brought the gay and lesbian community closer and infused it with a more democratic mandate. That is only a partial truth, which further underscores the fact that the gay community still operates from a one-

eyed, one gender, one color perception of *community* that is most likely to recognize blond before Black, but seldom the two together.

Some of the best minds of my generation believe AIDS has made the gay community a more responsible social construction, but what AIDS really manages to do is clearly point out how significant are the cultural and economic differences between us; differences so extreme that Black men suffer a disproportionate number of AIDS deaths in communities with very sophisticated gay health care services.

The best gay minds of my generation believe that we speak as one voice and dream one dream, but we are not monolithic. We are not even respectful of one another's differences. We are a long way from that, Dorothy. I tell you Kansas is closer.

We are communities engaged in a fragile coexistence if we are anything at all. Our most significant coalitions have been created in the realm of sex. What is most clear for Black gay men is this: we have to do for ourselves *now*, and for one another *now*, what no one has ever done for us. We have to be there for one another and trust less the adhesions of kisses and semen to bind us. Our only sure guarantee of survival is that which we construct from our own self-determination. White gay men may only be able to understand and respond to oppression as it relates to their ability to obtain orgasm without intrusion from the church and state. White gay men are only "other" in this society when they choose to come out of the closet. But all Black men are treated as "other" regardless of whether we sleep with men or women—our Black skin automatically marks us as "other."

Look around, brothers. There is rampant killing in *our* communities. Drug addiction and drug trafficking overwhelm us. The blood of young Black men runs curbside in a steady flow. The bodies of Black infants crave crack, not the warmth of a mother's love. The nation's prisons are reservations and shelters for Black men. An entire generation of Black youths

is being destroyed before our eyes. We cannot witness this in silence and apathy and claim our hands are bloodless. We are a wandering tribe that needs to go home before home is gone. We should not continue standing in line to be admitted into spaces that don't want us there. We cannot continue to exist without clinics, political organizations, human services, and cultural institutions that *we* create to support, sustain, and affirm us.

Our mothers and fathers are waiting for us. Our sisters and brothers are waiting. Our communities are waiting for us to come home. They need our love, our talents and skills, and we need theirs. They may not understand everything about us, but they will remain ignorant, misinformed, and lonely for us, and we for them, for as long as we stay away, hiding in communities that have never really welcomed us or the gifts we bring.

I ask you brother: Does your mama *really* know about you? Does she *really* know what I am? Does she know I want to love her son, care for him, nurture and celebrate him? Do you think she'll understand? I hope so, because *I am* coming home. There is no place else to go that will be worth so much effort and love.

MISS EMILY'S GRANDSON WON'T HUSH HIS MOUTH

THE LAST TIME I SAW MY GRANDMOTHER WAS IN THE SUMMER OF 1986, in Columbia, South Carolina. I spent two cherished weeks with her. Columbia is the American ancestral home of my mother's family. To make this journey priceless, I brought along my niece, Shakira, who was seven at the time, and my nephew, Aaron, who was then two. It was their first time flying in a jet, but the last time they would see their great-grandmother alive. A year later, at the age of eighty-six, she died.

To all of her friends, neighbors, and church sisters, she was "Miss Emily," but to our family she was always "Mother," "Grandmother," or "Nana," names that are for us synonymous with faith, love, and selflessness.

During the summer of 1986, I was working on bringing forth my second chapbook of poetry, *Conditions*. I was getting editorial assistance from Joseph Beam, and I would pay for the printing with money I received from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). After my two previous applications to the NEA Literature Program had been rejected, my third application was approved and funded for fiscal year 1986.

I submitted my first application to the NEA Literature Program in 1983. The poems submitted with my application were largely Black-oriented and did not deal with my sexuality. My application was rejected. (But it should have been. The poems were largely regurgitations of nationalist rhetoric.) My second application was submitted in 1984 with non-political poetry that bordered on being Hallmark greeting card sentiments. The application was rejected. For my third

application, submitted in 1985, I thought: "Fuck it. I'll send what I want to send, not what I think they want to read." That application contained poems from the *Conditions* manuscript, poems that spoke directly about homosexual and African American experiences. The application was approved for funding.

My first self-published chapbook, *Earth Life*, released in 1985, was funded entirely with my own savings. My grandmother had never read *Earth Life*, and to my knowledge, she had never been told by my family that I am gay. I never told her because the family felt it best that she not know this, although at times I felt compelled to tell her, especially during the two weeks we were last together. Before departing from Washington, D.C., I promised to maintain my silence regarding my sexuality. My mother later told me, "Your grandmother always kept you up in prayer," and I always felt like telling Mother, "I think it's because she knew I am gay."

During that two-week visit, the bond between Grandmother and me strengthened itself on pure love. It was the same love that helped to heal me when I was born prematurely with a heart murmur. It was the same love that disciplined me when I spent my summers with her as a youngster. And it was the same love that summoned me to Columbia with two great-grands in tow.

Grandmother told me that my cooking reminded her of Essex, my late grandfather. For a number of years he had owned a small restaurant in Columbia that was off-limits to my mother and her siblings because the restaurant attracted a crowd that was a bit risqué for Grandmother's tastes. My mother and her siblings were supposed to go to the restaurant only for the purpose of delivering the peach cobblers and apple pies Grandmother baked at home. But my mother tells me that she and her siblings would often sneak by the restaurant after school to visit with Granddaddy. He would serve them lemonade or soda pop and hurry them on their way so

that they would not incur Grandmother's wrath for being too tardy getting home from school.

Although I promised my family I would not reveal my sexuality to Grandmother, I took a copy of *Earth Life* to give to her. On an early afternoon, a week after arriving in Columbia, while Grandmother sat rocking on the front porch, and while my niece and nephew settled into their afternoon nap, I pulled out the copy of *Earth Life* knowing the moment to give it to her had come. I considered it to be an innocent gift, although subconsciously I realized that she would learn more from it than I would ever be able to tell her in this life.

On that particular afternoon, I was going to the barber to get my hair cut. I gave Grandmother *Earth Life* before I left. I didn't think she would read it immediately, but she did, during the hour I was away. When I returned, she was still on the porch rocking. She complimented my haircut as I pulled up a chair to sit with her. *Earth Life* and her reading glasses were resting in her lap. She was rocking, gently, her eyes focused straight ahead above the tops of the blossoming rose bushes growing around the porch. I thought she was focusing on the red rose petals or the sweet fruit on the fig tree just across the yard. I carefully ventured to break the silence enveloping us. "Grandmother," I hesitantly began, "it looks as though you read *Earth Life* while I was at the barber."

"Yes, I did," she replied, and she continued to rock. After a pause, she said, "These are very good poems, Essex, but they're a bit disturbing." Another moment of silence enveloped us. "You know I'm so proud of all my grands," she continued, "all of you are doing so well." She then looked me directly in the eye and smiled just a little slyly before asking, "Essex, do the authorities know what you're writing about?"

Perched on the edge of tension as I had been, I was completely unprepared for her question. I threw my head

back and laughed deeply, and Grandmother joined me. When we regained our sobriety, I realized that her question was very serious, and that our laughter had helped us both to mask the implications.

"I guess they know what I'm writing about, Grandmother, but I can't really be concerned with the authorities."

"Some of this is very disturbing," she said, "and I just want you to be careful. I don't want you getting hurt out here."

"But Grandmother, isn't it important to tell the truth?"

"Yes, it is *always* important to tell the truth, but truth means different things to different people. Some people can't handle the truth, Essex. I just want you to be careful. I will always love you, and I will always be so proud of you and all of my grands. Each one of you is special to me. It would break my heart to see any harm happen to any one of you."

"I'll always love you, too," I said, then I leaned over and kissed her on the cheek and hugged her.

Of the many things that I remember about Grandmother, her question, "Do the authorities know what you're writing about?" and her cautioning me to be careful are the words that come back to me ringing with all the intensity and conviction of her love and concern. She could formulate such a question only because she had witnessed how dangerous it is for Black people to be outspoken in America.

Perhaps Grandmother knew that down the line I would be defending my right to speak artistically to the social, cultural, and political issues of my life. Maybe she knew that in the fall of 1987 the D.C. Commission for the Arts would attempt to censor a performance that I and my artistic collaborator, musician Wayson Jones, would present as part of the city's annual arts awards program. We were invited by the arts commission to perform on the program, but we were not expecting them to attempt to censor our work, an at-

tempt that was launched around the word *corruption* because the arts commission feared, ironically, that the word would *insult* Mayor Marion Barry. The poem, "Family Jewels," which contains the word *corruption*, is about the difficulty Black residents of the city face getting a cab to stop and take us to our destination. "Corruption" is used in the poem only as a passing reference to define the political context in which the taxicab humiliations occur.

The director of the arts commission at the time, a Black woman named Barbara Nicholson, called me the afternoon of the program to suggest that I substitute another word for *corruption* or substitute another poem for "Family Jewels"—or don't show up; excuses would be made for our absence, and we would still be paid our performance fee. I falsely agreed to substitute the poem, knowing that once Wayson and I were on stage, we would do exactly as we had intended and read "Family Jewels." The audience gave us thunderous applause, and I gave the audience the "tea" concerning the censorship attempt by a commission supposedly designed to support and encourage artistic development.

Perhaps Grandmother knew that WPFW-FM, a non-profit progressive radio station based in Washington, D.C., and a member of the Pacifica broadcast network, would edit poetry that Wayson and I had presented on their "The Poet and the Poem" program in 1988. It was one thing to edit out the language in my work that the Federal Communications Commission deems offensive, but it was another thing to finally hear the broadcast and to realize that not just the "seven dirty words" but ideas and concepts were edited without our permission.

Maybe Grandmother knew that the editor of a Black literary journal based in the United States would call me and tell me that I should stop making public criticisms about the work of Robert Mapplethorpe regarding images of Black males. Even though the editor said that he agreed with my

point of view, he didn't feel that the climate was appropriate for my statements and warned that Senator Jesse Helms and company could use my commentary to continue attacking the NEA. The editor in question is a closeted homosexual who went on to say that because his journal receives funding from the NEA, he might not be able to print my work in future issues. I told him that he should check the source of his funding addictions and consider striving for self-sufficiency. If he's running scared because of Jesse Helms, my comments about Mapplethorpe's images of Black males, and the presence of homoeroticism in my work, then the NEA could make him jump through all kinds of hoops in order to keep his funding secure. He made me realize that there is nothing more detestable than a cowardly, closeted faggot. I hold no regrets about the break in our friendship.

In this same climate of censorship, it should also be noted that the gay author Edmund White feels that it was "so insulting" of me to comment critically about the objectification of Black males in the work of Robert Mapplethorpe. White's comments were made in a San Francisco gay newspaper. The questions raised by his condemnation of my remarks include, *Who has the right to critique popular culture?* Obviously, White doesn't think that Black gay men have such a right, particularly when the critique concerns the sacred cows of gay culture.

Maybe Grandmother knew that I would write "American Wedding" under the auspices of the NEA grant I received in 1986. Yes, it is totally appropriate to celebrate gay desire and affirm gay love with federal money. "American Wedding," which closes the *Conditions* collection, begins: "In america/I place my ring/on your cock/where it belongs." It seemed totally appropriate then (and more so now) that I would not only buy myself the time (with government money) to write that poem, but that I would also subvert the sanctity of the heterosexual wedding ceremony for the affirmation of gay love.

Yes, Grandmother, by now I believe the authorities know that I'm a Black faggot who *won't* hush his mouth. As Alfred Hitchcock once said at the end of one of his TV programs, "It's amazing what you see when you don't have a gun."

COMMITMENTS

I will always be there.
When the silence is exhumed.
When the photographs are examined
I will be pictured smiling
among siblings, parents,
nieces and nephews.

In the background of the photographs
the hazy smoke of barbecue,
a checkered red and white tablecloth
laden with blackened chicken,
glistening ribs, paper plates,
bottles of beer and pop.

In the photos
the smallest children
are held by their parents.
My arms are empty, or around
the shoulders of unsuspecting aunts
expecting to throw rice at me someday.

Or picture tinsel, candles,
ornamented, imitation trees,
or another table, this one
set for Thanksgiving,
a turkey steaming the lens.

My arms are empty
in those photos, too,

so empty they would break
around a lover.

I am always there
for critical emergencies,
graduations,
the middle of the night.

I am the invisible son.
In the family photos
nothing appears out of character.
I smile as I serve my duty.

IF FREUD HAD BEEN A NEUROTIC COLORED WOMAN: READING DR. FRANCES CRESS WELSING

Any force which estranges and alienates us from one another serves the interests of racist domination.

—BELL HOOKS

That there is homophobia among Black people in America is largely reflective of the homophobic culture in which we live. . . . Yet, we cannot rationalize the disease of homophobia among Black people as the white man's fault, for to do so is to absolve ourselves of our responsibility to transform ourselves.

—CHERYL CLARKE

IN 1974, THE YEAR THAT DR. FRANCES CRESS WELSING WROTE "THE Politics Behind Black Male Passivity, Effeminization, Bisexuality, and Homosexuality," I entered my final year of senior high school.

By that time, I had arrived at a very clear understanding of how dangerous it was to be a homosexual in my Black neighborhood and in society. I had no particular inclinations to slip on a dress like skin, wear loud lipstick, and wiggle my hips through the four A.M. shadows and street lights of the tenderloin or the boulevards where erotic desire was claimed by the highest bidder or the loneliest man. Facing this then-limited perception of homosexual life, I could only wonder, where did I fit in? I had no particular inclination to chase down men while wearing platform pumps and a miniskirt. None of this behavior was the least bit appealing to me.

Conversely, I was perfecting my heterosexual disguise; I was practicing the necessary use of masks for survival; I was

calculating the distance between the first day of class and graduation, the distance between graduation from high school and departure for college—and ultimately, the arrival of my freedom from home, community, and my immediate peers. I believed my imminent independence would allow me to explore what my hetero-disguise and my masks allowed me to conceal.

It is fortunate that the essay by Dr. Welsing I am citing here had not come to my attention during my adolescence. I can only imagine how little resistance the assault of her ideas would have been met with by me at that time. At seventeen, I wasn't coming out of anything I couldn't get back into immediately, and that included closets. But in 1974, the concept of "closets" had not come to my attention. I knew not to reveal my homosexual desires to my peers or discuss them with my family or any school counselor.

During the course of the next sixteen years I would articulate and politicize my sexuality. I would discover that homo sex did not constitute a whole life nor did it negate my racial identity or constitute a substantive reason to be estranged from my family and Black culture. I discovered, too, that the work ahead for me included, most importantly, being able to integrate all of my identities into a functioning self, instead of accepting a dysfunctional existence as the consequence of my homosexual desires.

Dr. Frances Cress Welsing, a controversial Washington, D.C.-based general and child psychiatrist, emerged on the Black cultural scene in the early 1970s. Her claim to fame is her controversial essay "The Cress Theory of Color-Confrontation and Racism (White Supremacy): A Psychogenetic Theory and World Outlook" (1970). This widely disseminated essay appears with her article "Black Male Passivity" in her recently released book, *The Isis Papers: The Keys to the Colors* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1990). She is a sought-after public speaker, and in recent years, her ideas

have been embraced in the reemergence of Black cultural nationalism, particularly by rap groups such as Public Enemy.

Welsing's "Theory of Color-Confrontation" forms the intellectual and political basis for her examination of various issues confronting Black Americans, including issues of sexuality and homosexuality. Her arguments about race and sexuality, based on her theories, are her *sincerely* held beliefs. She contextualizes her positions on sexuality in a myopic analysis of Black masculinity, an analysis constructed from a still very limited, very patriarchal, and culturally conservative view of what Black liberation should be.

For Black gays and lesbians, Dr. Welsing is not as easily dismissed as Shahrazad Ali, author of the notorious book of internal strife, *The Blackman's Guide to Understanding the Blackwoman* (Philadelphia: Civilized Publications, 1989). While Ali, like Welsing, attacks Black homosexuality, she reserves her harshest commentary for Black lesbians. She writes, "The lesbian Blackwoman has arrived at her final limit and literally blows a fuse in her brain which blocks out her real gender and replaces it with a masculine role. Of course, just as male homosexuals, she overdoes it and makes herself a spectacle that is not welcome among civilized people. She is rough and tough and ready to battle. . . . She needs a special exorcism (pp.151-152)." This is what Ali advised Black males. By dismissing the lives of Black lesbians and gay men, Ali is clearly not advocating the necessary healing Black communities presently require; she is advocating further factionalization. Her virulently homophobic ideas lack credibility and are easily dismissed as incendiary.

Dr. Welsing is much more dangerous because she attempts to justify her homophobia and heterosexism precisely by grounding it in an acute understanding of African-American history and an analysis of the psychological effects of centuries of racist oppression and violence. Rather than dismissing Black homosexuality, Welsing explains it as evidence of Black males *adapting* to oppression. While we may

disagree with Welsing's views, we must acknowledge her own obviously fertile intellect and the power that her ideas have in many parts of the Black community. Welsing's seductive fusion of her own ideology with widely held Black nationalist concepts only shows how potentially misdirected the effort to counterattack racism can be, even for those intelligent enough to see the connections between racism, homophobia, heterosexism, classism, and all other oppressions spawned by patriarchal and white-supremacist domination.

In "Black Male Passivity," Welsing refutes any logical understanding of sexuality. By espousing Black homophobia and heterosexism—imitations of the very oppressive forces of hegemonic white male heterosexuality she attempts to challenge—she places herself in direct collusion with the forces that continually move against Blacks, gays, lesbians, and all people of color. Thus, every time a gay man or a lesbian woman is violently attacked, blood is figuratively on Dr. Welsing's hands as surely as blood is on the hands of the attackers. Her ideas reinforce the belief that gay and lesbian lives are expendable, and her views also provide a clue as to why the Black community has failed to intelligently and coherently address critical, life-threatening issues such as AIDS.

Arguing against an acceptance of homosexuality within the Black community, Dr. Welsing cautions:

Black psychiatrists must understand that whites may condone homosexuality for themselves, but we as Blacks must see it as a strategy for destroying Black people that must be countered. Homosexuals or bisexuals should neither be condemned nor degraded, as they did not decide that they would be so programmed in childhood. The racist system should be held responsible. Our task is to treat and prevent its continuing and increasing occurrence (p. 91).

In other words, Dr. Welsing is suggesting that Black homosexuals are engaged in sexual genocide, in treason against the race, and are programmed by white racism to commit acts of *supposed* self-destruction such as choosing to love and be loved by members of the same gender. If we dare follow her ideas to their illogical conclusions, then we could easily argue that *every* Black action that fails to conform to Black societal codes of morality and ethics is caused by racism. Such reasoning allows for the shirking of responsibility for our actions and choices. It is simply too easy to say, "The devil made me do it."

Welsing's widely disseminated color-confrontation theory is the justification for her homophobic and heterosexist assault. Her theory is very seductive, particularly for Black people oppressed for so long. It is very much like cocaine; a dose of her ideas momentarily provides one with a rush of empowerment, but after the high is gone the harsh realities of racism still remain, just as sexual diversity, as created by nature, still remains irrevocable, uncontrollable.

Yet, what gives her ideas power is her capacity to *account for* Black male homosexuality and bisexuality by presenting them as predictable behaviors within her color-confrontation model.

The basis of her theory, which forms the framework for her puritanical assertions about sexuality and gender in general, is as follows:

Racism (white supremacy) is the dominant social system in today's world. Its fundamental dynamic is predicated upon the genetic recessive deficiency state of albinism, which is responsible for skin whiteness and thus the so-called "white race." This genetic recessive trait is dominated by the genetic capacity to produce any of the various degrees of skin melanination—whether black, brown, red or yellow. In other words, it can be annihilated as a

phenotypic condition. . . . Therefore, white survival and white power are dependent upon the various methodologies, tactics, and strategies developed to control all "non-white" men, as well as to bring them into cooperative submission. This is especially important in the case of Black men because they have the greatest capacity to produce melanin and, in turn, the greatest genetic potential for the annihilation of skin albinism or skin whiteness (p. 83).

This theory grounds Welsing's perspective on Black male homosexuality and bisexuality, allowing her to define them as dysfunctional behavioral responses to oppression. Asserting that "Black male homosexuality and bisexuality are only the long-run by-products of males submitting in fear to other males (p. 91)," she claims that Black male homosexuality and bisexuality have "been used by the white collective in its effort to survive genetically in a world dominated by colored people, and Black acceptance of this imposition does not solve the major problem of our oppression but only further retards its ultimate solution (p. 92)."

In attempting to account for homosexuality among whites, Welsing writes:

White male and female homosexuality can be viewed as the final expression of their dislike of their genetic albinism in a world numerically dominated by colored people. This dislike of their appearance, though deeply repressed, causes a negation of the act of self-reproduction (sex) in various forms. This is the eventual origin of homosexuality. . . .

Unlike the white male, the Black male does not arrive at the effeminate, bisexual or homosex-

ual stance from any deeply repressed sense of genetic weakness, inadequacy, or disgust, which I refer to as *primary effeminacy* (effeminacy that is self-derived and not imposed forcibly by others). Instead, the Black male arrives at this position *secondarily*, as the result of the imposed power and cruelty of the white male and the totality of the white supremacy social and political apparatus that has forced 20 generations of Black males into submission (p. 86).

It is less than sophisticated reasoning to reduce the social complexities of sexuality and its expression to the governing control and influence of white supremacy. To the extent that the history of racism has undeniably affected all facets of the lives of people of color (and whites as well), it is a legitimate concern to bring to any examination of sexuality. But to the extent that sexual identity and sexual practices represent conscious, personal choices, the most we can do is examine how sexuality is impacted upon and influenced by racism, in the same way that we can examine the impact of capitalism, religion, or patriarchy on sexuality.

To argue, as Welsing does, that racism *causes* homosexuality is to suggest that Black liberation will somehow eradicate Black homosexuality. If such eradication is to occur in the process of dismantling and destroying white supremacy, then what method(s) will be employed to achieve this? Does Black liberation ultimately require the confinement or extermination of Black homosexuals? Will Black liberation cancel out homosexual desire? The answer is surely a resounding *no!* Will Black liberation fail without the unqualified support and participation of Black gays and lesbians? The answer is an equally resounding *yes!*

In the glaring absence of a progressive feminist analysis, Welsing expediently ignores all efforts to achieve a co-gendered liberation. By arguing that Black men are alienated

from their manhood by Black women (their mothers in single-parent contexts) and society (white males), Dr. Welsing embarks upon the classic, homo-bashing tirade of Black nationalist patriarchs who have consistently attacked homosexuals as weak, irrelevant cocksuckers. She also buys into the patriarchal concept that the only legitimate family is one headed by a man with a submissive woman by his side. She blames Black women who have been hurt by Black men and left with raising children alone for fostering the existence of Black homosexuality, because "the alienation, hate, and disgust felt towards adult males are visited upon their sons subtly (p. 88)."

This transference of "hate and disgust" supposedly alienates Black male children from themselves and their manhood. "Black males soon learn that it is easier to be a female child than a male child, and more promising to be an adult Black female than an adult Black male (p. 88)." She additionally argues that this attitude is reinforced in Black male children by the Black female teachers they come into contact with who may also be "hurt and disgusted" with Black men and, again, transfer this to Black male children.

Arguing that the alienation between Black men and women and the absence of male role models in the home and in the community promote the occurrence of homosexuality, bisexuality, effeminization, and passivity, Welsing writes:

There is only one solution—that Black males collectively face the horrendous presence of white males and conquer the accompanying fear engendered by this act. After the white man is faced, he must be resisted steadfastly and fought if he continues to wage war on Black people—as he has demonstrated historically that he intends to do. And it is Black males and not females who must do the fighting (p. 90).

Finally, Dr. Welsing trots out the standard beliefs regarding prisons and the confinement of Black men—that they, too, *breed* homosexuality. Writing of an ex-prisoner patient whom she identifies as an example of twenty generations of racist abuse, Welsing confides in us that he said:

“It is easier to endure the life on the inside than to try to put up with the pressures of being a man, a husband, and a father in the street.” The intent of racist programming had been achieved: “Give up trying to be a Black man. Why not be a woman?” Many Black males have answered unconsciously, “Why not!” The braided and curled hair, the earrings and bracelets, the midriff tops, the cinch waisted pants, the flowered underwear, the high-heeled shoes with platforms and the pocket-books are all behavioral answers to the above. They say in loud and clear language, “White man, I will never come after you. I cannot run in my high-heels—you know that. And I may mess up my hair.”

Welsing’s reasoning is so flawed, outdated, and totally hetero-reactionary that I am curiously reminded of the child who found himself faced with having to tell the emperor he’s wearing none of the beautiful clothes that his court is leading him to believe he’s wearing—or, as in a more recent example, of the discovery that Milli Vanilli didn’t really sing a note of their hit song “Girl You Know It’s True.”

I suspect, however, that if Freud had been a neurotic, Black nationalist colored woman living in the noxious racism of America, out of desperation he might very well have formulated homophobic and heterosexist theories such as Dr. Welsing’s. Even among the oppressed there is a disturbing need for a convenient “other” to vent anger against, to blame, to disparage, to denigrate. Such behavior is surely as

detrimental as any an oppressor can exercise against the oppressed. There is no excuse for such behavior just as there is no credibility for Dr. Welsing's theories regarding sexuality. At best, her views reinforce the rampant homophobia and heterosexism that have paralyzed the Black liberation struggle. She widens the existing breach between Black gays and lesbians and their heterosexual counterparts, offering no bridges for joining our differences. And throughout it all, she does not foster an understanding of our differences as she would lead us to believe, but instead offers justification for homophobia and heterosexism to continue disabling Black communities.

Despite the popularity of Dr. Welsing's views among many Black nationalists and some who claim Afrocentricity, Black gays and lesbians and advocates of diversity can take sustenance and inspiration from the words of Cheryl Clarke, who in her 1983 essay from *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983), "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community," firmly urges us:

Open and proud Black gay men and lesbians must take an assertive stand against the blatant homophobia expressed by members of the Black intellectual and political community who consider themselves custodians of the revolution. For if we will not tolerate the homophobia of the culture in general, we cannot tolerate it from Black people, no matter what their positions in the Black liberation movement. Homophobia is a measure of how far removed we are from the psychological transformations we so desperately need to engender. The expression of homophobic sentiments, the threatening political postures assumed by Black radicals and progressives of the nationalist/communist ilk, and the seeming lack of any willingness to under-

stand the politics of gay and lesbian liberation collude with the dominant white male culture to repress not only gay men and lesbians, but also to repress a natural part of all human beings, namely the bisexual potential in us all. Homophobia divides Black people as political allies, it cuts off political growth, stifles revolution, and perpetuates patriarchal domination (p. 207).

So, Dr. Welsing, you say you want to have a revolution, or are you just talking like you do?

LOYALTY

FOR MY SO-CALLED SINS AGAINST NATURE AND THE RACE, I GAIN the burdensome knowledge of carnal secrets. It rivals rituals of sacrifice and worship, and conjures the same glassy-eyed results—with less bloodshed. A knowledge disquieting and liberating inhabits my soul. It often comforts me, or at times is miserably intoxicating with requisite hangovers and regrets. At other moments it is sacred communion, causing me to moan and tremble and cuss as the Holy Ghost fucks me. It is a knowledge of fire and beauty that I will carry beyond the grave. When I sit in God's final judgment, I will wager this knowledge against my entrance into the Holy Kingdom. There was no other way for me to know the beauty of Earth except through the sexual love of men, men who were often more terrified than I, even as they posed before me, behind flimsy constructions of manhood, mocking me with muscles, erections, and wives.

I discovered any man can be seduced—even if the price is humiliation or death for the seducer. Late nights and desperate hours teach us to approach loneliness unarmed, or we risk provoking it to torture us with endless living sorrows we believe only the dead can endure.

But who are these dead, able to withstand the constant attack of merciless loneliness with its intense weapons, its clever trickery and deceit? Many of them are men like me, born of common stock, ordinary dreamers. Men who vaguely answer to "American," or exhibit visible apprehension when American is defined and celebrated to their exclusion. Men who more often than not are simply ignored.

We constitute the invisible brothers in our communi-

ties, those of us who live "in the life"; the choir boys harboring secrets, the uncle living in an impeccable flat with a roommate who sleeps down the hall when family visits; men of power and humble peasantry, reduced to silence and invisibility for the safety they procure from these constructions. Men emasculated in the complicity of not speaking out, rendered mute by the middle-class aspirations of a people trying hard to forget the shame and cruelties of slavery and ghettos. Through denials and abbreviated histories riddled with omissions, the middle class sets about whitewashing and fixing up the race to impress each other *and* the racists who don't give a damn.

I speak for thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of men who live and die in the shadows of secrets, unable to speak of the love that helps them endure and contribute to the race. Their ordinary kisses, stolen or shared behind facades of heroic achievement, their kisses of sweet spit and loyalty are scrubbed away by the propaganda makers of the race, the "Talented Tenth" who would just as soon have us believe Black people can fly, rather than reveal that Black men have been longing to kiss one another, and have done so, for centuries.

The Black homosexual is hard pressed to gain audience among his heterosexual brothers; even if he is more talented, he is inhibited by his silence or his admissions. This is what the race has depended on in being able to erase homosexuality from our recorded history. The "chosen" history. But these sacred constructions of silence are futile exercises in denial. We will not go away with our issues of sexuality. We are coming home.

It is not enough to tell us that one was a brilliant poet, scientist, educator, or rebel. Whom did he love? It makes a difference. I can't become a whole man simply on what is fed to me: watered-down versions of Black life in America. I need the ass-splitting truth to be told, so I will have something pure to emulate, a reason to remain loyal.

THREE

RIGHTS AND PERMISSIONS

Sometimes I hold
my warm seed
up to my mouth
very close
to my parched lips
and whisper
"I'm sorry,"
before I turn my hand
over the toilet
and listen to the seed
splash into the water.

I rinse what remains
down the drain,
dry my hands—
they return
to their tasks
as if nothing
out of place
has occurred.

I go on being,
wearing my shirts
and trousers,
voting, praying,
paying rent,
pissing in public,
cussing cabs,
fussing with utilities.

What I learn
as age advances,
relentless pillager,
is that we shrink
inside our shirts
and trousers,
or we spread
beyond the seams.
The hair we cherished
disappears.

Sometimes I hold
my warm seed
up to my mouth
and kiss it.

OBJECT LESSONS

If I am comfortable
on the pedestal
you are looking at,
if I am indolent and content
to lay here on my stomach,
my determinations
indulged and glistening
in baby oil and sweat,
if I want to be here, a pet,
to be touched, a toy,
if I choose
to be liked in this way,
if I desire to be object,
to be sexualized
in this object way,
by one or two at a time,
for a night or a thousand days,
for money or power,
for the awesome orgasms
to be had, to be coveted,
or for my own selfish wantonness,
for the feeling of being
pleasure, being touched.
The pedestal was here,
so I climbed up.
I located myself.
I appropriated this context.
It was my fantasy,
my desire to do so

and lie here
on my stomach.
Why are you looking?
What do you wanna
do about it?

INVITATIONS ALL AROUND

If he is your lover,
never mind.
Perhaps, if we ask
he will join us.

THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

You are not to touch yourself
in any way
or be familiar with ecstasy.
You are not to touch
anyone of your own sex
or outside of your race
then talk about it,
photograph it, write it down
in explicit details, or paint it
red, orange, blue, or dance
in honor of its power, dance
for its beauty, dance
because it's yours.

You are not to touch other flesh
without a police permit.
You have no privacy—
the State wants to seize your bed
and sleep with you.
The State wants to control
your sexuality, your birth rate,
your passion.
The message is clear:
your penis, your vagina,
your testicles, your womb,
your anus, your orgasm,
these belong to the State.

You are not to touch yourself
or be familiar with ecstasy.
The erogenous zones
are not demilitarized.

WITHOUT COMMENT

THE S2 IS THE SO-CALLED AVENUE OF THE PRESIDENTS BUS BECAUSE its route is the handsome and seductive 16th Street corridor. The S2 travels from downtown Pennsylvania Avenue to Silver Spring, Maryland, a suburban town that borders D.C. at its northern edge.

The ridership on the S2 is black, white, and variously ethnic. Hispanics, West Africans, and Caribbean passengers, as well as other nationals, diversify the sophisticated commuter ambiance. Newspapers, books, and quiet conversations are standard as the S2 speeds its way to Adams Morgan, Mt. Pleasant, the Gold Coast, the end of the line, and back again.

Sixteenth Street—lined with embassies, churches, respectable homes, and majestic trees swaying overhead from Lafayette Park to Silver Spring—this undulating, rolling hill climbs and descends with deceptive grace. At its side, in the middle of a Black gay ghetto called Homo Heights, sits the once glorious, mystical park called Malcom X by Black cultural nationalists, although its official name is Meridian Hill. At dusk it becomes a Black gay cruising ground, while during the day it serves as one of the city's open-air drug markets.

Vandalism and graffiti now mar its classic beauty like brutal knife wounds that have become keloids. The shrubbery has been hacked down in an effort to prevent crimes that still occur. The once green grounds are bald and littered with used condoms and assorted trash. Decay and decline exist here. Gloom and danger are ever present in the piss-stained air, air that is often thick with marijuana smoke and always filled with the hawker's cry of drug dealers. And al-

though children romp and wrestle on these grounds, and soccer players kick the game ball back and forth, the men appear who cannot contain their loneliness till dusk. They are not zombies. Their eyes are luminous with enormous, living hungers, but no one seems to notice except those of their kind. For Black gay men, this park, elegantly appointed with gushing fountains, grand stairways, moonlit plazas, and statues of Dante and Joan of Arc—for Black men seeking the kisses of one another, Malcom X/Meridian Hill Park is now nothing more than a tomb of sorrow.

I remember riding the S2 home one evening, a Sunday, in fact. I had taken the X2 from H Street, N.E. to 14th and H downtown, where I transferred and waited for my S. From the corner of 14th and H you can view the warscape of AIDS and the remnants of casual sex zones reduced to rubble by the aggressive development of downtown. It is interesting to observe new, postmodern office buildings rise on soil where the seed of gay men was once spilled with reckless abandon.

Ten years ago this corner was a sexual crossroads. On either side of 14th Street, from H to I, there once stood thriving porn shops, movie galleries, and nude dance clubs. A block east of 14th, on 13th Street, the raunchy Black gay club, the Brass Rail, was bulging out of its jockstrap. Drag queens ruled, B-boys chased giddy government workers, fast-talking hustlers worked the floor, while sugar daddies panted for attention in the shadows, offering free drinks and money to any friendly trade. Everybody was seeking a sex machine. White folks were sneaking in for their "Black-dick-fix." Sometimes the dose was fatal: Robbery. Murder. The pulsing music always throbbed like an insatiate erection.

A block north of the Brass Rail, Franklin Park was a soft cruise spot primarily because it borders K Street, 14th and 13th Streets offering too much visibility for most. But east of its lower end, bordering I Street, on the 13th Street corner, stood the notorious Curiosity Bookshop, complete with back room, movie booths, garish red lights, gusts of

heavy breathing, and the popping noise of greased dicks pumping in and out of tight holes. The creaking floorboards were aging with semen and sighs. Every now and then you'd hear a man hiss, "Work that pussy, bitch," as clusters of panting men gathered to watch an ass being fucked.

At that most historic spot downtown, where, on the corner of 14th and H, one could watch the parade of flesh all summer long, the quest for the perfect abuse was keen. Now the area is almost desolate of nightlife, the players scattered, the seekers scared to venture out.

I wait for my bus. Shortly before it arrives, two Black men cruise by. They appear to be in their thirties-forties. The shorter, stockier, fair-skinned, clean-shaven Homeboy has his arm thrown around the shoulders of the slightly taller, slender, darker daddy. The tall man is obviously older, mustached, and somewhat attractive. Homeboy carries a hustler's air about him. They swagger by, slightly drunk and horny. I am surprised when a few stops later they board the bus and sit at the back.

The bus crosses K Street and continues up 16th without incident. The seats fill quickly. By the time we cross P Street standing room is all that's available. A murmur begins to rise from the back of the bus. It explodes into a startling confrontation.

"You my bitch!"

"No! Uh uh. We are bitches!"

"No! You listen here. I ain't wearing lipstick, you are! I ain't no bitch! I fucked you! You my bitch!"

This argument continues without resolution until we arrive at 16th and U Streets. The bus is packed with passengers, and as we approach the stop, I see ten more waiting to board. Just as the first person at the stop steps aboard, a strident, hysterical voice cuts loose from the back:

"I'm a 45-year-old-Black-gay-man who *en-joys* taking dick in his rectum!" SNAP! "I'm not your bitch!" SNAP! "Your bitch is at home with your kids!" SNAP! SNAP!

We are entering the fifth dimension of our sexual consciousness. The ride is rough. There is no jelly for this. The driver is trying to call the police on the bus phone. No one has said anything. No one else attempts to board.

The air is charged with tensions unleashed from an ancient box of sexual secrets. The older man abruptly leaves by the back door. Homeboy follows. They have violent words outside. The children sitting at the front are wide-eyed and speechless. All the homosexuals on the bus have frozen. So have I. The driver is frantically calling the police. The older man suddenly pushes aboard wielding a Flash Pass with Homeboy in hot pursuit. The driver drops the phone and jumps between them. Homeboy pulls out a knife and waves it toward his companion.

"You gonna pay for this dick!" he sneers.

"I ain't paying for that tame shit!"

The children's heads snap back and forth during the ensuing shouting match as though they are watching a Ping Pong tournament and not two grown Black men giving high drama. In a stern voice the driver orders Homeboy to leave the bus. He backs down the steps, waving his blade, threatening to catch the Black gay man on the street and make him pay *dearly* for the dick he got. Homeboy is last seen stalking east on U Street with his glinting knife clenched in hand.

The bus pulls off and begins to climb 16th Street. Every homosexual on the bus is still frozen. So am I. The police never arrived. The children are quiet for the remainder of their journeys. So am I. Occasionally, a very nervous man, a very terrified schoolboy laughs out loud then subsides into silence. The 45-year-old-Black-gay-man who enjoys taking dick in his rectum rides the rest of the way without further incident. At the back of the bus he sits—his legs crossed at the knee.

SONG FOR RAPUNZEL

His hair
almost touches
his shoulders.
He dreams
of long braids,
ladders,
vines of hair.
He stands
like Rapunzel,
waiting on his balcony
to be rescued
from the fire-breathing
dragons of loneliness.
They breathe
at his hips
and thighs
the years soften
as they turn.
How long must he dream
ladders no one climbs?
He stands like Rapunzel,
growing deaf,
waiting
for a call.

THE TOMB OF SORROW

FOR MAHOMET

*I cannot say,
that I have gone to hell
for your love
but often
found myself there
in your pursuit.*

—WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS
"Asphodel, That Greeny Flower"

I

Gunshots ring out above our heads
as we sit beneath your favorite tree,
in this park called Meridian Hill,
called Malcolm X, that you call
the "Tomb of Sorrow,"
(and claim to be its gatekeeper);
in the cool air lingering after the rain,
the men return to the Wailing Wall
to throw laughter and sad glances
into the fountains below,
or they scream out
for a stud by any name,
their beautiful asses
rimmed by the moon.

Gunshots ring out above our heads
as we cock dance
beneath your favorite tree.

There are no invectives
to use against us.
We are exhausted
from dreaming wet dreams,
afraid of the passion
that briefly consoles us.
I ask no more of you
than I ask of myself:
no more guilt, no more pity.
Occult risks await us
at the edge of restraint.

These are meaningless kisses
(aren't they?)
that we pass back and forth
like poppers and crack pipes,
and for a fleeting moment,
in a flash of heat and consent,
we release our souls
to hover above our bodies;
we believe our shuddering orgasms
are transcendental;
our loneliness manifests itself
as seed we cannot take
or give.

Gunshots ring out above our heads,
a few of us are seeking romance,
others a piece of ass,
some—a stroke of dick.
The rest of us are killing.
The rest of us get killed.

When I die,
honey chil',
my angels
will be tall
Black drag queens.
I will eat their stockings
as they fling them
into the blue
shadows of dawn.
I will suck
their purple lips
to anoint my mouth
for the utterance of prayer.

My witnesses
will have to answer
to go-go music.
Dancing and sweat
will be required
at my funeral.

Someone will have to answer
the mail I leave,
the messages
on my phone service;
someone else
will have to tend
to the aching that drove me
to seek soul.

Everything different
tests my faith.
I have stood in places
where the absence of light

allowed me to live longer,
while at the same time
it rendered me blind.

I struggle against
plagues, plots,
pressure,
paranoia.
Everyone wants a price
for my living.

When I die,
my angels,
immaculate
Black diva
drag queens,
all of them
sequined
and seductive,
some of them
will come back
to haunt you,
I promise,
honey chil'.

III

You stood beneath a tree
guarding moonlight,
clothed in military fatigues,
black boots, shadows,
winter rain, midnight,
jerking your dick slowly,
deliberately calling attention
to its proud length

and swollen head.
A warrior dick,
a dick of consequences
nodded knowingly at me.

You were stirring it
when I approached,
making it swell more,
allowing raindrops escaping
through leaves and branches
to bounce off of it
and shatter like doubt.

Among the strangest gifts
I received from you
(and I returned them all)—
a chest of dark, ancient wood,
inside: red velvet cushions,
coins, paper money
from around the world.
A red book of hand-drawn runes,
a kufi, prayer beads,
a broken timepiece—
the stench of dry manure.

And there were other things
never to be forgotten—
a silver horse head
to hold my chain of keys,
a Christian sword,
black candles,
black dolls
with big dicks
and blue dreads
that you nailed
above my bed

to ensure fidelity.
A beer bottle filled
with hand-drawn soap,
a specificity—
a description of your life,
beliefs, present work,
weight and height;
declarations of love
which I accepted,
overlooking how I disguised
my real motivations—
a desire to keep
some dick at home
and love it as best I can.

I was on duty to your madness
like a night nurse
in a cancer ward.
Not one alarm went off
as I laid with you, Succubus.
I've dreamed of you
standing outside my soul
beneath a freakish tree,
stroking your dick
which is longer
in the dream, but I,
unable to be moved
and enchanted,
rebuke you.
I vomit up your snake
and hack it to pieces,
laughing as I strike.

No, I was not
your pussy,
she would be

your dead wife.
I believe you
dispatched her soul
or turned her into a cat.
I was your man lover,
gambling dangerously
with my soul.
I was determined to love you
but you were haunted
by Vietnam,
taunted by demons.
In my arms you dreamed
of tropical jungles,
of young village girls
with razors embedded in their pussies,
lethal chopsticks
hidden in their hair,
and their nipples clenched
like grenade pins
between your grinding teeth.
You rocked and kicked
in your troubled sleep,
as though you were fucking
one of those dangerous cunts,
and I was by your side,
unable to hex it away,
or accept that peace
means nothing to you,
and the dreams you suffer
may be my only revenge.

IV

*It was an end to masturbation.
That's what I was seeking.*

*I couldn't say it then, no,
I couldn't say it then.*

When you told me
your first lover,
a white man,
wanted you to spit,
shit, piss on,
fist-fuck and
throw him down stairs,
alarms should have
blared forth
like hordes
of screaming queens.

When you said
in the beginning
you beat up Black men
after you fucked them,
when you said
in the last year
you were buying crack
for Black men
who let you fuck 'em,
alarms should have
deafened me for life.

When you told me
you once tied a naked man
between two trees
in an isolated,
wooded area,
debased him,
leaving him there
for several days,
then sent others

to rape him and feed him,
my head should have exploded
into shrapnel
and killed us both.

When you swore you loved me
and claimed to be sent here
to protect me,
I should have put bullets
in my temple
or flaming swords
up my ass.

Feeling my usual
sexual vexations,
I came here then,
seeking only pleasure,
dressed for the easy seduction.
I never considered
carrying a cross.
I had no intention
of being another queen
looking out
at the morning rain
from the Wailing Wall,
hoping to spy a brutish man
with a nearby home.
Slouching through Homo Heights,
I came to the Tomb of Sorrow
seeking penetration and Black seed.
My self-inflicted injuries occurred
when I began loving you
and trusting you.

V

Where's my needle?
Fetch my thread.
I'm going to sew
a prince to my bed.

Stitch by stitch
I'll shuttle my thread
in and out
and around his head.

Over his fingers,
down to his toes,
up his crotch,
through his nose.

Be he live
or be he dead
I'll sew his heart
to my bed.

Stitch by stitch
I shuttle my thread
in and out
and around his head.

VI

Through some other
set of eyes
I have to see you,
homeboy,
fantasy charmer,
object of my desire,

my scorn,
abuser of my affections,
curse, beauty,
tough/soft young men,
masked men,
cussing men,
sweet swaggering
buffalo soldiers.

Through some other
set of eyes
I must recognize
our positions
are often equal.
We are worth more
to each other
than twenty dollars,
bags of crack,
bullets piercing our skulls.
I can't hope to help
save us from destruction
by using my bed
as a pagan temple,
a false safe house.
There are other ways
to cross the nights,
to form lasting bonds;
there are other desires
as consuming as flesh.
There are ways
to respect our beauty.

Through some other set
of common eyes
I have to behold you
again, homeboy.

I rummage through
ancestral memories
in search of the
original tribes
that fathered us.
I want to remember
the exact practices
of civility
we agreed upon.
I want us to remember
the nobility of decency.

At the end of the day,
through some other vision,
perhaps the consequence
of growing firm and older,
I see the thorns of the rose
are not my enemy.
I strive to see this
in each of us—
O ancient petals,
O recent blooms.

SO MANY DREAMS

Had I been clear-headed
there would have been
no pattern of sanity
to follow.
Out of this confusion
I bring my heart,
a pale blue crystal,
a single rose,
a kiss long held for you
before the myth of Atlantis
was created to challenge
the genius of
Memphis and Senegal.
I long for the occult sciences
to inform you of my affections,
and if this evidence
is insufficient,
then let a single dream
containing the content of my soul
spill throughout your sleep,
and from all the nights
I have longed for you
in a spell of masturbation,
take whatever voice I would use
to call out your name
in the sleeping garden,
take whatever suits you,
my love, for now.

FOUR

CEREMONIES

I STOOD BEFORE HIM GRINNING, MY UNDERSHORTS AND PANTS WERE down around my knees. I trembled and panted as he stroked me. After weeks of being coaxed and teased to come by, I had finally succumbed to George's suggestions. I had sneaked up to the store very early that morning, before it opened, after my mother left for work.

The sexual hunger that would eventually illuminate my eyes began then. I was a skinny little fourteen-year-old Black boy, growing up in a ghetto that had not yet suffered the fatal wounds and injuries caused by drugs and Black-on-Black crime.

My neighborhood, my immediate homespace, was an oasis of strivers. A majority of the families living on my block owned their homes. My sexual curiosity would have blossomed in any context, but in Southeast Washington, D.C., where I grew up, I had to carefully allow my petals to unfold. If I had revealed them too soon they would surely have been snatched away, brutalized, and scattered down alleys. I was already alert enough to know what happened to the flamboyant boys at the school who were called "sissies" and "faggots." I could not have endured then the violence and indignities they often suffered.

George was at least thirty years older than I, tall, and slightly muscular beneath his oversized work clothes which consisted of khakis, a cotton short-sleeved shirt, and a white apron. He wore black work boots similar to those of construction workers. Many of the boys in the neighborhood teased him viciously, but I hadn't understood before the morning he and I were together just what motivated them

to be cruel and nasty by turn. At that time, I didn't know that George had initiated most of the boys I knew, and some of their older brothers, one by one, into the pleasures of homo sex.

Only months before my visit to him that April morning, I had roamed the parking lot of a nearby country bar—my adolescent desire drove me out there one night, and one night only—discreetly asking the predominately white patrons if they would let me suck their dicks for free. My request was never fulfilled because I believe the men were shocked that I would so boldly solicit them. I was lucky no one summoned the police to come for me. I was lucky I wasn't dragged off to some nearby wooded area and killed.

George was a white man. My initiation into homo sex was guided by the hands of a white man. The significance of this in a racial context was not lost on me, but it wasn't a concern strong enough to check my desire. For weeks George had whispered he wanted to suck my dick. Catching me alone in the store or responding to my request for a particular product, he would quickly serve me, seizing the opportunity to whisper in my ear. *And I was listening.*

Eventually I went to the store on pretense, requesting something I knew they wouldn't have, such as a specific brand of soap or floor wax, just so he would wait on me and whisper. If we had been caught when we finally began fucking, the law would have charged him with molesting and sodomizing me as a minor because of my age, but the law would not have believed that I wanted him to suck my dick. I wanted him to touch me. I wanted to fuck his ass. I, willingly, by the volition of my own desires, engaged in acts of sexual passion, somewhat clumsily, but nonetheless sure of my decision to do so.

When George liberated his equally swollen cock from his pants it sprang out engorged with blood and fire. The head of it was deep pink in color. I was startled to see that the hair surrounding it was as red as the hair on his head.

George again lowered himself to eye level with my cock and drew me into his mouth once more. It was hard to tell which of us was enjoying the cock sucking more. Suddenly, he pulled his mouth off my wet shaft, got up off his knees and hurried to the front of the store. He promptly returned with a short stack of grocery bags, newspapers, and a small jar of Vaseline.

"You're gonna fuck me." It wasn't a statement or a command from him, it was a fact neither of us could turn away from.

After spreading the newspaper and bags on the floor behind the deli counter to create a makeshift paper pallet, George opened the Vaseline, scooped out some with his index finger, and pushed it up into his asshole. He turned his back to me so I could see the pink entrance of his anus being penetrated by the steady in and out motion of his finger. My dick was so hard I thought it would break into a thousand pieces of stone around our feet. The lips of his asshole kissed and sucked his finger as he pushed it in and out, in and out. After thoroughly greasing his asshole, George then scooped out more Vaseline and smeared it all over my dick.

"Ahh! Ahh!" I sighed out in pleasure.

"Yeah, you're ready," he said approvingly, stroking me a few times more. Guided by George, who had now laid down upon the pallet and beckoned me to climb on, my cock, led by his hand, entered his ass in one smooth penetration. I didn't know at that moment that I would mount him all summer, night and day, and pour my adolescence into him. I would lie to get away from home and friends to be with him. I learned then that sneaking, ducking, and hiding were key components of a homo sex life simply because of the risk of exposure and the often devastating consequences.

I continued to visit George early in the morning before the store opened, fucking him at the back of the store behind the deli counter on bags and newspapers. I fucked him at his

house at the end of his work day while his mongrel dog sat and watched us. From the spring through the late summer of 1971, George was the focus of my sexuality. He was the veracity of my sexual desire.

As it would turn out, I became his sole sex partner for that brief summer. I have often speculated that perhaps among all of the homeboys who passed through his hands, I was the one *wanting* to learn more. George knew this, and to the extent that he could exploit my youth for his pleasure, I allowed myself to be exploited and fondled and sucked, because I wanted this, too. I wanted him. I didn't come back to the store and tease him and curse him as did the other boys who had fucked him. I didn't demand money as some did. After their orgasms they resented him, but what they really resented was the recognition of their own *homo* sexual desire.

I kept silent about our activities. I would dare not say that we were in love. I wasn't sure I loved myself at fourteen, but I knew that my dick got hard for George. Never once did I give any thought to the possibility that I might be committing some sin I would be punished for in hell. Sin was the furthest thing from my consciousness. Hell was all around me in the ghetto of my adolescence.

My dick did not fall off in his mouth. I did not turn green from kissing him. I didn't burst into flames during our orgasms, nor did he. In fact, during orgasm, I often called out Jesus' name, which seemed appropriate for warding off such evil as I might have imagined we were committing. If anything, I was most concerned about being caught by my buddies or his co-workers. To this day I'm convinced the other fellas didn't know that I, too, was being initiated by George. Our group identity and rapport did not allow for this kind of discussion or candor to occur.

I regret that we were never able to talk about our visits to George. I regret, too, that we were not able to sexually explore one another in the same way that we allowed George

to explore us. Ours was truly a fragile, stereotypical Black masculinity that would not recognize homo desire as anything but perverse and a deviation from the expected "role" of a man. The ridicule we risked incurring would have condemned us to forever prove our "manhood" or succumb to being the target of a hatred that was, at best, a result of hating *self* for desiring to sexually touch the flesh of another male.

At fourteen, I was astute enough to know my mouth should not reveal any desire that would further endanger me. There was no "older" brother at home to stand watch over my blossoming manhood. There was no father there, either. I was solely responsible for myself—the eldest sibling, the eldest son. Neither of those absences is an explanation for my sexual identity. Only nature knows the reason why.

During that same summer that George introduced me to homoeroticism, my public acceptance as "one of the boys" was severely challenged. The night is so clear to me. It was mid-August, sultry, humid, August, and the anticipation of returning to school was in the air. My buddies, Tommy, Tyrone, Leon, Peanut, and Kevin, we were all across the street from my house talking with some of the older boys—David, George, Doug, Wayne, Kenny, and Leon's brother, Crip.

My mother's bedroom was located at the front of our house and her windows faced out to the street. Her windows were open because there was no air conditioning in the house at that time. The night breeze was as much relief as we could hope for from the oppressive Washington summers.

Across the street from my house, on Douglas's and Kenny's front porch, we were talking about everything from sports to girls. It was the typical conversation of males in various stages of adolescence. We all shined in the streetlights that beat down on our variously muscular frames burnished by the summer sun. Our conversation rose and fell, exerting its brashness and bravado against the night, kicking around in our heads, drawing us into laughter and silence by

turns, as we listened to stories of pussy conquests, petty scams, and recent ass kickings. The conversation was dominated by the older boys, who by turn tried to impart fragments of street warrior knowledge to us. We were sitting and standing, absorbing all this, relaxing our tough postures, allowing a communal trust to put us at ease and make us glib and attentive.

Crip was standing. I was sitting. It happened that from where I sat I could eye his crotch with a slight upward shift of my eyes. Well, one of the times that I peeked, Crip caught me. I would soon discover that I had cruised into very dangerous territory. Lulled by the conversation, I had allowed myself to become intoxicated on the blossoming masculinity surrounding me. I might as well have been shooting semen from wet dreams straight into my veins for the high I was on in this gathering of males.

Instantly, Crip jumped forward and got in my face. "I see you looking at my dick!" he hurled at me. I felt as though he had accused me of breaking into his house and violating his mother. Immediately, all conversation ceased and all eyes focused on me and Crip.

"Do you wanna suck my big, Black dick, mutha-fucka?" he demanded, clutching his crotch and moving up into my face. "Do you, nigga?"

Thank God my instincts told me to stand up. It was this defensive posture that perhaps saved me from an *absolute* humiliation, but my "No" was weak.

"Well, why are you looking at my dick? Is you a freak? You must wanna suck it. Are you a faggot? You can suck it, baby," he mockingly cooed, still clutching what was more than a handful of cock.

The fellas were laughing and slapping palms all around by this time. I was becoming visibly angry, but I had still uttered nothing more than a meek "No" to his challenge. I then remembered my mother's bedroom windows; they were open; she must have heard him.

The laughter began to die down. The sexual tension in the air was palpable enough to be slapped around. Crip's attitude changed for the worse.

"You shouldn't be looking at a muthafucka's dick unless you plan to suck it," he sneered. It now seemed that all along he had been bellowing at me, so I was even more convinced my mother had heard him.

"Are you funny, nigga?" he asked, deadly serious, which elicited more raucous laughter from the fellas.

"No," I said, attempting to put more conviction in my voice. Crip was but an inch or two taller than me, and a pretty Black male. He carried beauty as agilely as some Black men carry footballs and basketballs and pride. I was surely attracted to him, but to even have hinted at that would have cost me more than the humiliation I endured that night.

So there we stood, me surrounded by gales of laughter punctuated by his booming voice, and all the time, in the back of my mind, I believe my mother was listening, in shock, hearing my humiliation. To her credit, if she overheard this she never confronted me with it.

Crip finally ended his tirade. The conversation resumed its boisterous, brash bravado. Shortly thereafter, I excused myself from the fellas, crossed the street, locked the door behind me, and cried myself to sleep in my bed. It would not be the last time I would cry myself to sleep because a male had inflicted me with emotional pain. It would not be the last time I would lock the door behind me and go to my bed alone, frightened of my sexuality and the desires I could not then speak of or name as clearly as I could articulate the dangers.

My sexual encounters with George ceased several weeks before summer vacation ended. In retrospect, I believe I stopped visiting him at the store and at his home as a direct result of the humiliation I suffered from Crip. I must have thought it would only be a matter of time before we would be discovered. Whatever my reasons, my refusal to engage

in any more sex bewildered George. He continued to coax me to climb up on his back, but I could no longer be seduced. He enticed me with money but I refused that, too. When I was sent to the store by my mother, I would go two blocks out of the way to another convenience store just to avoid the longing I recognized in his eyes, a longing that was partially stoked by my mutual desire. I would later discover that such a longing inhabits the eyes of many homosexuals, particularly those who believe themselves to be unable to come out of the closet.

The school year resumed itself uneventfully. The only change, other than those occurring because of puberty, was the increasing burden of carrying a secret. I was learning to live with it safely hidden away, but for how long? It was surely dangerous knowledge. There was no one I could tell about my sexual adventures with George. There was no previous reference of intimacy to compare to sex. I continued nurturing my desire in the long nights of my adolescence, quietly masturbating in my bed as my younger brother slept above on the upper bunk.

Black male adolescent survival in a ghetto context made me realize the necessity of having a girlfriend, a female I could be seen walking home after school. It would be my luck to date girls who were "good," girls who were not going to experiment with sex beyond kissing and fondling, and even that was often only tolerated at a minimum if tolerated at all.

I was not the kind of male to force the issue of going all the way sexually. For me, it was enough to have a cover for my *true* desires, and that's what these girls were—covers. But I treated them with respect. They were *girl friends* more often than not.

I had the opportunity to have sex with one of the girls I dated. She agreed to skip school with me one day. We hid out at her house, our mutual motive: sex. After a long morning of petting and kissing the big moment arrived. We stum-

bled to her bedroom along an unfamiliar path that frightened and excited us. I was nervous because I expected her mother or father or one of her siblings to walk in and catch us.

In our adolescent nakedness we were beautiful, but if caught, we would have been seen as *being ugly*. We were sixteen and fifteen and ripe with curiosity and desire. Her skin was honey gold, smooth, so soft to my touch. Her breasts were full and sweet, the nipples brown and swollen by my tongue. Her hair was plaited in thick braids that coiled atop her head like snakes. We were both virgins. Nothing in our timid sex education classes at school or our evasive discussions at home had prepared us for walking into her bedroom to face our beautiful nakedness.

I believe we both felt we had to go through with the act because we had gone so far. In my mind, George appeared, but that was *different*. He had not instructed me about girls or young women. No one had. I kept hearing the older boys scat about breaking the cherry, but there was no cherry hanging between her legs when I looked. What was there was wet and warm to my fingers.

She laid so still on her bed. I knelt above her, fondling her breasts, kissing her, imagining these must be the things to do to seduce her. Neither of us spoke. As our breathing escalated I grabbed my cock and guided the head toward her vagina. She opened her legs to show me the mouth that was there, wet and waiting. Sunlight poured over us. Sweat bathed our bodies. We were straining ourselves to break rules we were taught not to break. We exerted ourselves against everything we were told not to do.

I pressed my head against the wet mouth. I pushed. She pulled away. I inched forward. Pushed. She pulled away again.

"Am I hurting you?" I asked nervously.

"Yes," she said softly.

"We don't have to do this," I assured her, saying this

more for my comfort rather than her own. I didn't want to be doing this, after all.

"But I want to," she said. "I want to do this. It will make you—it will make *us* happy."

I rose up off her body. "Maybe this isn't the right time," I said. Looking down at her, I then realized how lovely she was and how little I knew of her. How little she *really* knew of me. I thought of George and a tingle stirred in my loins. I realized I didn't desire penetrating her. I was doing this for my reputation. I thought I needed to walk away with a bloody sheet to prove what—that I could break a hymen? I had no thought about consequences. There was no condom to prevent pregnancy, no pills being taken that I knew of. We were entangled in limbs we couldn't name, dry-throated, sweaty, pursuing different objectives in the afternoon bed we had stolen. My erection slowly fell. I lowered myself onto her again and kissed her lightly on the lips.

"We should probably get dressed," I encouraged her. "Someone might come home soon." That was the last and only time we were naked together. Not long after, we stopped seeing each other romantically.

A year later, she began dating an older boy around school. We saw each other less often, and then one day I saw her in a maternity blouse. I believe she finished school—I'm not sure—but by that time she wasn't my concern. I was seeing another "good girl," walking her home, holding her hand, pretending I was consumed by love—safe, by all appearances, from being identified as a faggot.

FIVE

FAMILY JEWELS

FOR WASHINGTON, D.C.

I live in a town
where pretense and bone structure
prevail as credentials
of status and beauty—
a town bewitched
by mirrors, horoscopes,
and corruption.

I intrude on this nightmare,
arm outstretched from curbside.
I'm not pointing to Zimbabwe.
I want a cab
to take me to Southeast
so I can visit my mother.
I'm not ashamed to cross
the bridge that takes me there.

No matter where I live
or what I wear
the cabs speed by.
Or they suddenly brake
a few feet away
spewing fumes in my face
to serve a fair-skinned fare.

I live in a town
where everyone is afraid
of the dark.
I stand my ground unarmed

facing a mounting disrespect,
a diminishing patience,
a need for defense.

In passing headlights
I appear to be a criminal.
I'm a weird-looking
muthafucka.
Shaggy green hair sprouts all over me.
My shoulders hunch and bulge. I growl
as blood drips from my glinting fangs.

My mother's flowers are wilting
while I wait.
Our dinner
is cold by now.

I live in a town
where pretense and structure
are devices of cruelty—
a town bewitched
by mirrors, horoscopes,
and blood.

IF I SIMPLY WANTED STATUS, I'D WEAR CALVIN KLEIN

I HAVE NEVER BEEN A SLAVE TO FASHION, SO IT WAS SIMPLY RASH OF me to think I could boldly wear my fireball-red FAG CLUB T-shirt in public and not be confronted. I had purchased the T-shirt in San Francisco without any hesitation whatsoever. In fact, I purchased *two* T-shirts: the red athletic T and the black crewneck, both bearing FAG CLUB prominently displayed in bold white letters stacked across the front. Mind you, the day I wore that T-shirt all over Washington, D.C., I was truly voguing. I was featuring heavy transgression in a town of government secrets, political intrigue, and kinky sex.

The confrontation did not occur downtown or on the bus or subway as I thought it might. I was in my neighborhood, Mt. Pleasant, when it happened. People I had encountered on the buses and downtown sidewalks didn't challenge me. They were surprised by the T-shirt, as indicated by the number of double takes it received.

The red was tinted with a little orange and was very eye-catching in the summer sun. By the time I returned to Mt. Pleasant later that afternoon, I had completely forgotten I was wearing it. I had never flaunted my sexuality so immediately to so many. I had never communicated my sexual identity so intentionally as I did by choosing to wear that FAG CLUB T-shirt in public.

I needed to get a few things for dinner before going home, so I stopped at the supermarket a few blocks from my apartment. As the market doors swooshed behind me and I passed through the entrance turnstile, a young boy screamed out, "Look, everybody, there's a faggot in the store!" You

would have thought people were supposed to start diving to the floor.

I stopped only for an instant to look over my shoulder to see whom he was calling out. Seeing no one behind me, when I looked ahead again I realized everyone was looking at me. I then remembered I was wearing FAG CLUB emblazoned on my chest like the name of a superhero.

I immediately stepped forward in full control of my location and my presence of mind. I knew this scene must have looked very funny, but I was determined to keep my composure. There were little bursts of laughter here and there but nothing too serious. I glided down the aisles completing my short grocery list and avoiding direct eye contact until I reached the checkout line. There, the clerk looked at my T-shirt and smiled. I smiled back at her, then she turned and began ringing up my groceries.

Just then, the young boy who had shouted, "There's a faggot in the store!" came up to me from the exit of the checkout line. He was a curly-haired, ten-year-old Black boy.

"Hey, Mister, I have a cousin like you. He's gay, too." He continued approaching until he was standing beside me. I looked into his face and saw no fear, no hatred, no disgust.

"Did you get that in Washington?" he asked, pointing to my T-shirt. "My cousin would like one of those."

He was not the least bit shy in telling me this. He looked me directly in the eye, waiting for my response.

"No, I didn't get this in Washington," I told him. "I got it in San Francisco. You can get them there."

"I thought so," he said. "I didn't think you could get a T-shirt like *that* in D.C. I like it. See you!" Then he turned and left.

I stood there momentarily disarmed by his candor and only a little self-conscious about my interaction with him. How we appeared to the others watching us did cross my mind. But then I thought, *If I simply wanted status, I could wear Calvin Klein and strike a pose. That's safe.*

TO BE REAL

The gay life is about affectation, but style is not imagemaking. Style, at best, is an attitude, a reaction to oppression, a way of being perceived as less oppressed, a way of feeling attractive when we are deemed unattractive.

—JOSEPH BEAM

"Making Ourselves from Scratch"

"WHAT BECOMES A LEGEND MOST?"

IN AMERICA, THE SEDUCTIVE ADVERTISING SLOGAN "MEMBERSHIP HAS its privileges" ominously celebrates economic injustice and class and racial oppression. And *Paris Is Burning*, Jenny Livingston's fierce, award-winning documentary on Black gay drag balls, is a window onto a world where the hunger for privilege, dignity, and membership is thought to be satisfied by material possessions.

This, it would seem, is what the disempowered and marginalized dream of having access to and owning when they dream of power, at least in the context of the balls. But these dreams are not particularly unique, they are our common language.

The balls on which Livingston turns her lens feature Black and Latino, mostly poor, gay men—and a few women—mocking and playing out the rituals of a fashion show. The "children," grouped into "houses" of fashion, vie for trophies in the highly competitive balls.

"This is white America," says a voice off camera as ball walkers parade and pose in nautical and grand attire, stylishly stepping to the strains of what sounds like a British coronation march. "When it comes to minorities, especially Blacks," the voice soberly continues, "we, as a people, for

the past four hundred years are the greatest example of behavior modification in the history of civilization. We have had everything taken away from us, and yet we have all learned how to survive. That is why in the ballroom circuit it is so obvious that if you have captured the great white way of living, or looking, or dressing, or speaking, you is a marvel."

Unabashedly, *Paris Is Burning* shows us a world where illusion and signifying are valued precisely because they have the power to affirm and engender confidence and self-esteem. For those who are brave enough to participate in this highly dramatic milieu, for those brave enough to "walk a ball" and "snatch a trophy," the most coveted reward is to earn the adulation of their peers and the judges who will confer upon them the title of "legendary," which is the same as becoming a "star."

As one of the MCs in the film shouts at a group of ball walkers, "O-P-U-L-E-N-C-E! OPULENCE! You own everything! Everything is YOURS!" he could well be shouting at legions of white men and women, but the ball walkers listening to his fervid, insinuating exhortations are Black and Puerto Rican. And as they walk they believe they own everything for that moment; everything that was ever theirs, everything stolen from them, everything that they can imagine owning while the crowd cheers them on. And if the crowd and the judges are convinced of the walker's "realness," if the trained and the untrained eye cannot tell the difference, then the illusionist wins a trophy and recognition, but it's a small fame in an invisible and troubled world.

Competition in the ball world stretches across a diverse array of categories, which allows everyone to participate. Some of the categories for both Butch and Femme Queens include: Sportswear, Eveningwear, Schoolboy/Schoolgirl Realness, Executive Realness, and Military Realness; other categories include Bangee Boy and Bangee Girl Realness, and my favorite category, which is the one I would likely compete in: Butch Queen First Time in Drags at a Ball. What

these categories tell us is that in this world membership is open to everyone. As the MC says, "We all at one time or another have lusted to walk a ballroom floor."

In a country where "membership" and "privileges" translate into white, male heterosexuality, which is itself an overly interrogated and distracting pose and illusion, *Paris Is Burning* comes to the screen with a dressing room full of articulate butch/femme queens who collectively say, "I am," and are so, *so real*.

Transsexuals, drag queens, gays and sexual transgressives, gender benders, legendary children, up and coming legendary children, mothers and fathers, elders; surrogate families are constructed from this to replace the ones that may no longer exist as a resource, or that may be too dysfunctional to offer any sense of safety, support, or love. Houses of silk and gabardine are built. Houses of dream and fantasy. Houses that bear the names of their legendary founders or that bear the names of fashion designers such as Chanel or Saint Laurent parade and pose at the balls. Houses rise and fall. Legends come and go. To pose is to reach for power while simultaneously holding a *real* powerlessness at bay.

Television and magazines tell us that our standards of beauty must be those of white, supremacist, heterosexual culture, and if in doubt we should look to *sacred* Europe for guidance. Everyone is potentially at risk of aspiring to be like and look like the very thing that despises their existence. In an ironic twist on the idea that the disempowered aspire to look like those in power, it is curious to note the now popular occurrence among fashionable and monied white women of taking silicone injections in their lips in order to make them fuller, like Negroid lips. This surgically created effect is called the "Paris lip," though Black women have been giving this "natural beauty" for centuries without the aid of injections.

Maybe Paris, a bastion of standards of Western beauty, is beginning to burn in the torment of its own genetic dis-

satisfaction, or maybe this is boredom and restlessness, or nothing of any more significance than the recent appropriation of rap by white rapper Vanilla Ice or the appropriation of voguing, originally a Black gay dance, by Madonna. Vanilla Ice and Madonna ruthlessly continue the tradition of exploiting and stealing from Black culture. They are clearly descendants of Elvis Presley and other culture vultures that have gone skipping to the bank trading on their imitations and appropriations of Black culture for fame and fortune.

Voguing grew out of the gay balls. It is a very expressive dance of hands and limbs and attitude that is best exemplified by the gifted voguer Willi Ninja, Mother of the House of Ninja. The name for the dance is appropriated from *Vogue*, the infamous fashion bible, because the dance is a stylized imitation and exaggeration of fashion modeling. But from Madonna, the legendary "material girl," the raider, the plunderer, you will never hear acknowledgment of the fact that voguing grew out of Black and Puerto Rican gay ball communities.

Her "Vogue" song, a commercial hit, was an insult to these communities because the litany of names she calls in the song as representative of style and attitude deliberately excludes Blacks and Puerto Ricans. Obviously Madonna must believe that Blacks and Puerto Ricans have contributed nothing to the theater of style and attitude originating in this country, since names like Josephine Baker, Dorothy Dandridge, and Celia Cruz are conspicuously absent from her list of the beautiful ones.

Black gay British filmmaker, Isaac Julien, raised an important issue regarding Black art and culture when I interviewed him shortly after the release of his (1989) Black gay film, *Looking for Langston*. He said, "I'm more interested in questions concerning the commodification of Black art and culture. I think questions such as commodification provide a more realistic analysis and critique of Black art as we approach the end of the twentieth century." Not only are the

questions of commodification more critical than we may yet realize, but urgent questions about American and Western cultural appropriations of those it despises, marginalizes, and disempowers also emerge from the interrogation Julien suggests.

What I find commendable about Livingston's *Paris Is Burning* is that she allows the voices of this highly transgressive ball community to emerge without her interference, without excessive questioning. The "children" enter the frame talking about their lives, the significance of the balls, their families, their precious dreams. We are not exposed to any of Livingston's judgments, if she has any, of the subjects. The authentic voice of this community emerges unfettered.

What was obviously at risk for Livingston, as a white, lesbian filmmaker, is that she could have been rejected as an outsider by the community she was documenting, or she could have mistakenly imposed her personal cultural presumptions and interpretations upon the material. But fortunately, we are spared such a travesty. What we are left with, however, is a lack of historical contextualization for the phenomena of the balls, but even this lack of context is diminished by the brutal honesty of the subjects.

"SWEET DREAMS ARE MADE OF THIS"

Entering the world of the balls is to enter a world where the harsh, soul-breaking realities of oppression are mitigated by the nurturing of dreams and fantasies of splendor. Many are there for the fame and glory a successful walk can bring. Surely, the walk itself and the projected illusion of grandness are far more appealing than the prospect of seeing no acknowledgment of your beauty or your worth anywhere around you. The day-to-day realities of oppression have driven others to less creative survival options than dressing up and pretending to be someone other than who they are.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that using illusion to construct identity is unique to Black gay reality. Everyone is capable of creating and employing illusion and fantasy for whatever purpose. An immediate example can be cited in a style of rap music known as "gangsta rap." The rapper boasts of being an outlaw, of having control and power, guns and money; again, things longed for by the disempowered. Glorifying urban terror in gangsta rap, or glorifying the American image of what success and beauty are and seeking to emulate that at gay balls; longing for a thick gold chain and a jeep or a thick strand of diamonds and a designer gown are not different longings in the context of Black reality. They are very much the same. In either instance they are longings from a place of disempowerment and their potential for causing self-destruction is vast. They are seductive longings, mutated dreams forged from the multitudinous oppressions constructing American society.

In *Paris Is Burning*, power remains almost exclusively defined in materialistic, Caucasian, and consumer terms. Many long to be rich and famous. Some long to be white and female, clearly an escapist longing, a longing that if realized would then place them in collusion with white supremacy—the primary source of their present disempowerment. They want to be stars in a world that barely wants to see them alive and thriving. They want *things* in a world that has caused more than a few of them to not want themselves.

The danger in illusion is that it doesn't remove the facts of racism, sexism, homophobia, and economic injustice—it may only temper or obscure them for the moment. Leaping through the looking glass is a risky escape from oppression and can result in an early death. As Octavia Saint Laurent says, "I don't want to end up an old drag queen with nothing going for me but trying to win grand prize at a ball."

Octavia is an attractive transsexual determined to be on the covers of fashion magazines. For her, drag balls are not

enough. She wants membership. She wants recognition. She wants privilege. She says, "Sometimes I sit and look at a magazine and I try to imagine myself on the front cover or even inside."

Some in this world are deluded by the imagined possibilities awaiting them beyond the ballroom approval of their peers. That some of the dreams they hold are sweetly scented and waft through the air like trails of silk is not surprising: the illusion for some is to be seductive and intriguing, to deflect and hold at bay the reality that does not tell them they are wanted and needed and desired. Dorian Corey, a professional drag queen and "elder" from the "old school," says of the power of illusion, "You erase all the mistakes, all the flaws, all the give-aways to make your illusion perfect."

Dorian provides a clarifying voice, succinctly explaining various aspects of ball life as he has seen it evolve over several decades. In his voice there is a willing acceptance of the life he has chosen for himself.

The camera visits him as he begins dressing for an evening, painting his face, taking his time, as though he has done this ten thousand times before and automatically assumes there will be applause when his drag is done. The small fame Dorian speaks of achieving in ball settings is perhaps just that in comparison with the enormous amount of wisdom and clarity he brings to *Paris*. He is an elder. He provides a blunt lucidness that is at once eloquent and even protective of his community.

It is Corey who comments on the influence of television on the illusions of younger ball walkers. Corey recalls a time when everyone wanted to look like movie stars as opposed to the present generation's obsession with emulating "Dynasty's" Alexis and Krystal and other soap opera divas. "When I grew up you wanted to look like Marlene Dietrich or Betty Grable. Unfortunately, I didn't know that I really wanted to look like Lena Horne. When I grew up Black stars

were stigmatized. Nobody wanted to look like Lena Horne. Everyone wanted to look like Marilyn Monroe."

Venus Xtravaganza, a petite, seductive-looking Puerto Rican pretranssexual noted for his "femme realness," speaks volumes of suffering from racist and economic oppression when he says, "I would like to be a spoiled, rich white girl. They get what they want whenever they want it, and they don't have to really struggle with finances." He deepens the complexity of his identity crisis and his dislocation when he later in the film spells out his wants in simple, direct, poetic statements. He says,

I want a car.

I want to be with the man I love.

I want a nice home, away from New York,
up the Peekskill or maybe in Florida,
somewhere far where no one knows me.

I want my sex changed.

I want to get married in church in white.

I want to be a complete woman.

I want to be a professional model
behind cameras in the high fashion world.

I want this. This is what I want
and I'm gonna go for it.

Venus never lives to have his sex changed or get married in a church in white. Angie Xtravaganza, Mother of the House of Xtravaganza, shares this story. "I always used to tell her, 'Venus, you take too many chances, you're too wild with people in the streets, something is going to happen to you,' but that was Venus. She always took a chance. She always went into a stranger's car. She always did what she wanted to get what she wanted. . . . The [detectives] came to me with a picture of her murdered. They were about to cremate her because nobody had come to verify the body. [They] found her dead after four days, strangled, under a bed in a

sleazy hotel in New York City. . . . She was like my right hand. . . . I miss her. [She] was the main daughter of my house. But that's part of life, that's part of being a transsexual in New York City and surviving."

Pepper LaBeija, Legendary Mother of the House of LeBeija, claims that he has won more ball trophies than any of them, and that he has been reigning for twenty years. Pepper confidently boasts that "New York is wrapped up in LaBeija." The ball circuit confirms his legend. Like Dorian, he has seen the high and low side of drag life. He knows the ball is all some live for. He and Corey explain how the houses function as surrogate families for Black and Puerto Rican gay youth who may be homeless, orphaned, or rejected by their families because of their gayness. When joining a house, it is customary for members to adopt the name of the house for their surname to signify that they "belong" to a family.

"Mothers" are usually those who have made legendary names for themselves on the ball circuit. A mother's duties can be numerous, but the primary function is to manage and nurture the illusions of the children because the children are all-important. A mother must ready the children for competition. They have to be fierce enough to snatch trophies and bring prestige and honor to the house. The highly competitive balls have been likened to street gangs at war over turf or sports teams competing for pennants.

The balls originated in Harlem and have a longer cultural history than that which is revealed in *Paris Is Burning*. Some of the history of the drag balls is traced back to the Harlem Renaissance in Eric Garber's essay, "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem," which appears in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: Meridian Books, 1990). Garber tells us that the balls were called "spectacles in color" by poet Langston Hughes, and that "both men and women could dress as they pleased and dance with whom they wished (p. 324)." Garber also notes that "The largest balls were the

annual events held by the Hamilton Lodge at the regal Rockland Palace, which could accommodate up to six thousand people. Only slightly smaller were the balls given irregularly at the dazzling Savoy Ballroom, with its crystal chandeliers and elegant marble staircase. The organizers would obtain a police permit making the ball, and its participants, legal for the evening. The highlight of the event was the beauty contest, in which the fashionably dressed drags would vie for the title of Queen of the Ball."

Paris Is Burning is a combustible mix of race, gender, sexuality, class, and identity issues. Contradictions speak out as loudly and as candidly as the subjects. Feminists have raised legitimate questions about men replicating the submissive and passive female identity constructed to oppress women vertically *and* horizontally. "Femme Realness" condones the very things feminists have condemned and criticized about patriarchally constructed female identity. That the balls reward what feminists reject is not an issue to be taken lightly.

Speaking about the occurrence of sex-change operations, Pepper LeBeija said, "I've been a man, and I've been a man who emulated a woman. I've never been a woman. I've never had that service once a month. I've never been pregnant. I can never say how a woman feels. I can only say how a man who acts like a woman or dresses like a woman feels. I never wanted to have a sex change, that's just taking it a little too far. . . . A lot of the kids that I know, they got the sex change because they felt, 'Oh, I've been treated so bad as a drag queen. If I get a pussy, I'll be treated fabulous.' But women get treated bad. They get beat. They get robbed. They get dogged. So, having the vagina, that doesn't mean that you're going to have a fabulous life, it might in fact be worse."

Paris Is Burning reveals what price some of us are willing to pay for membership, privilege, and realness. Realness is valued for the obverse of what one expects realness to be. It

isn't candor that defines realness, it's illusion. Realness is the ability to pass as something you are not, as in poor for rich, male for female, gay for straight.

The erasure or silencing of identity through the use of illusion might be considered simply an act of entertainment in the context of the balls if it weren't such a willful act of survival and affirmation exercised in a state of increasing desperation. The yearning festering behind the illusions is a yearning for a full equality and a common privilege that America has yet to deliver, and it may have to be forcibly taken, by any means necessary, if any of us are truly to be real.

SOFT TARGETS

FOR BLACK GIRLS

He was arrested and detained
for nailing Barbie doll heads
to telephone poles.

He was beaten
while in custody, accused
of defacing public property.

After healing, he resumed
his irreverent campaign,
this outlawed spook terrorist
continued hammering horse nails

through Barbie heads
and setting them aflame.

Barbie never told Black girls
they are beautiful.

She never acknowledged
their breathtaking Negritude.

She never told them
to possess their own souls.

They were merely shadows
clutching the edges of her mirror.

■ ■ ■
Barbie never told Black girls
they are beautiful,

not in the ghetto evenings
after double dutch,

nor in the integrated suburbs,
after ballet class.

CORDON NEGRO

I drink champagne early in the morning
instead of leaving my house
with an M16 and nowhere to go.

I die twice as fast
as any other American
between eighteen and thirty-five.
This disturbs me,
but I try not to show it in public.

Each morning I open my eyes is a miracle.
The blessing of opening them
is temporary on any given day.
I could be taken out,
I could go off,
I could forget to be careful.
Even my brothers, hunted, hunt me.
I'm the only one who values my life
and sometimes I don't give a damn.

My love life can kill me.
I'm faced daily with choosing violence
or a demeanor that saves every other life
but my own.

I won't cross over.
It's time someone came to me
not to patronize me physically,
sexually or humorously.

I'm sick of being an endangered species,
sick of being a goddamn statistic.
So what are my choices?

I could leave with no intention
of coming home tonight,
go crazy downtown and raise hell
on a rooftop with my rifle.
I could live for a brief moment
on the six o'clock news,
or masquerade another day
through the corridors of commerce
and American dreams.

I'm dying twice as fast
as any other American.
So I pour myself a glass of champagne,
I cut it with a drop of orange juice.

After I swallow my liquid Valium,
my private celebration
for being alive this morning,
I leave my shelter,
I guard my life with no apologies.
My concerns are small
and personal.

IN AN AFTERNOON LIGHT

ON A RECENT AFTERNOON IN PHILADELPHIA, I WALKED TO THE CORNER of 63rd and Malvern Streets to catch a number 10 trolley, my imaginary streetcar named Desire. Waiting, when I arrived at the stop, was another Black man, sipping a bottle of beer and smoking a cigarette. He wore sunshades and was built three sizes larger than my compact frame. I guessed him to be in his thirties though his pot-belly suggested an older age or the consumption of too much beer and soul food. A blue hand towel was tossed over his right shoulder. A baseball jacket was draped across his left thigh. He was sitting on the wall I sit on when I wait here.

Since there was no trolley in sight, I guardedly walked over and sat at the far end of the wall. He continued to drink his beer as I observed him from the corner of my eye. I pretended to occupy myself with looking for an approaching trolley. He abruptly ended our brief interlude of silence. For no apparent reason he blurted out, "Man, the woman's movement is ruling the world. It's turning our sons into faggots and our men into punks."

"What do you mean?" I asked, raising my voice as loudly as he had raised his. Indignation and defensiveness tinged my vocal chords. I thought his remarks were directed specifically at me.

"You see all the cars going by?" he asked, gesturing at the minor traffic.

"Yeah, so what about it?"

"Well, can't you see that all the drivers in the cars are women—"

"Which only means more women are driving," I interjected.

"—because women have caused major changes in society, brother."

"So?"

"So women are ruling more things now. That's why I don't want my son to spend all his time with his mother, his grandmother, and those aunts of his. His mother and I don't live together, but I go visit him and take him downtown or to the movies or to the Boy's Club. I think that's important, so he'll know the difference."

"The difference in what?"

"The difference between a woman and a man. You know . . ."

"Which is supposed to be determined by what—how they use their sex organs? What I do know, brother, is that 13- and 14-year-old Black children are breeding babies they can't care for—crack babies, AIDS babies, accidental babies, babies that will grow up and inherit their parents' poverty and powerlessness. The truth is young people are fucking because they want to fuck. They're encouraged to fuck. Yet we don't talk to them frankly and honestly about sex, sexuality, or their responsibility."

"Okay brother, hold that thought. You're moving too fast. See, this is what I mean. Suppose you grow up in a home with your father being a minister and your mother is there all the time taking care of the house and kids. You grow up, go off to college and get a good education, then—"

"Yeah—"

"—then you decide you gonna be gay. You like men. I say you learned that. Education did that. Your folks didn't teach you that."

"That's bullshit, and you know it. It's stupid to suggest that women or education can make a man gay. What you fail to understand is that this is the natural diversity of human sexuality no matter what we call it. Also, my father is

a minister, my mother was at home raising us before they divorced, and I went to college. And you know what?"

"What?"

"I'm a faggot."

"No you ain't!"

"Yes I am. In fact, I'm becoming a well-known faggot."

"I don't believe you."

"Why not?"

"Because you ain't switching and stuff."

"Yeah, all you think being gay is about is men switching—but you're wrong. I'm a faggot because I love *me* enough to be who I am. If your son becomes a faggot it won't be because of the way you or his mother raise him. It won't be because of television, movies, books, and education. It will be because he learns to trust the natural expression of his sexuality without fear or shame. If he learns anything about courage from you or his mother, then he'll grow up to be himself. You can't blame being straight or gay on a woman or education. The education that's needed should be for the purpose of bringing us all out of sexual ignorance. Our diverse sexuality is determined by the will of nature, and nature is the will of God."

He sat there for a moment staring at me, sipping his beer. He lit another cigarette. I realized then that he could beat me to a pulp if he chose to impose his bigger size on me, but I wasn't afraid for what I had said and revealed. On too many occasions I have sat silently as men like him mouthed off about gays and women and I said nothing because I was afraid. But not today. Not this afternoon. The longer I sit silently in my own community, my own home, and say nothing, I condone the ignorance and its by-products of violence and discrimination. I prolong my existence in a realm of invisibility and complicity. I prolong our mutual suffering by saying nothing.

In this tense interlude a bus and trolley approached. I was angry with having to encounter him on such a glorious

spring day, but this is the kind of work social change requires. I consoled myself believing this.

When he rose I immediately rose too—a defensive strategy, a precaution.

"It's been good talking to you, brother. I'll think about what you've said." He extended his hand to me just as the bus and the trolley neared. I looked at his hand, known and unknown to me, offered tenuously, waiting to clasp my hand.

"Yeah, it was cool talking to you, too," I returned, as I hesitantly shook his hand. He swaggered to the bus and boarded with his beer hidden under the jacket he carried. I walked into the street to meet the trolley in an afternoon light devoid of shame.

BLACK MACHISMO

Metaphorically speaking
his black dick is so big
when it stands up erect
it silences
the sound of his voice.
It obscures his view
of the territory, his history,
the cosmology of his identity
is rendered invisible.

When his big black dick
is not erect
it drags behind him,
a heavy, obtuse thing,
his balls and chains
clattering, making
so much noise
I cannot hear him
even if I want to listen.

TO SOME SUPPOSED BROTHERS

You judge a woman
by the length of her skirt,
by the way she walks,
talks, looks, and acts;
by the color of her skin you judge
and will call her "Bitch!"

"Black bitch!"

if she doesn't answer your:

"Hey baby, whatcha gonna say
to a man."

You judge a woman
by the job she holds,
by the number of children she's had,
by the number of digits on her check,
by the many men she may have lain with
and wonder what jive murphy
you'll run on her this time.

You tell a woman
every poetic love line
you can think of,
then like the desperate needle
of a strung out junkie
you plunge into her veins,
travel wildly through her blood,
confuse her mind, make her hate,
and be cold to the men to come,

destroying the thread of calm
she held.

You judge a woman
by what she can do for you alone
but there's no need
for slaves to have slaves.

You judge a woman
by impressions you think you've made.
Ask and she gives,
take without asking,
beat on her and she'll obey,
throw her name up and down the streets
like some loose whistle—
knowing her neighbors will talk.
Her friends will chew her name.
Her family's blood will run loose
like a broken creek.
And when you're gone,
a woman is left
healing her wounds alone.

But we so-called men,
we so-called brothers
wonder why it's so hard
to love *our* women
when we're about loving them
the way america
loves us.

GARDENIAS

Another station, a new town.
The same COLORED and
WHITE ONLY signs.
By now I shouldn't really care
but it amazes me still.

Every town since St. Louis
has been mean and nasty.
Signs everywhere,
and in some places
whorehouses
for COLORED ONLY
but no proper places
where a lady can pee.

Tonight, once again
I tie my hair up
with gardenias.
I blacken my face
and set myself afire
singing for my man.

Where O where
can he be, can he be?
Out looking for a place
without signs,
somewhere better
than New York

to hang his hat
or to just watch me
unbraid gardenias
from my hair.

I WANT TO TALK ABOUT YOU

Wizards. All of them. Wizards.
Gravel in their throats.
Worrying the line.
Horn to bleeding lips.
Fingers thrashing white keys
cascading black.
Wizards of impulse and verve,
blizzard blowing wizards blowing
blue-red-bright-black-blow-ing
a capella saxophones.
Scat wizards trans-
muting anguish
into bird songs.

Soul boys who found freedom
in the pedals and sticks
of their instruments,
who took freedom,
putting out in jook joints
and dance halls,
putting up on
chicken-bone buses
'cross country
that kept on going
through cracker towns,
'cause there was no place
for a busload
of Colored musicians
to stop.

■ ■ ■
This was before Martin dreamed,
before panthers stalked,
before fire spoke eloquently
like our trumpeters.

Gardenias, trains, cannonballs,
anything we needed
they became.

They were wizards.

We were in love and trouble.

We wanted salt peanuts,
pennies from heaven,

a love supreme,

a love supreme.

SIX

SELECTIONS FROM *EARTH LIFE* (1985)

PRESSING FLATS

You wanna sleep on my chest?
You wanna listen to my heart beat
all through the night?
It's the only jazz station
with a twenty-four-hour signal,
if you wanna listen.

If you answer yes
I expect you to be able
to sleep in a pit of cobras.
You should be willing
to destroy your enemy
if it comes to that.
If you have a weapon.
If you know how to use your hands.

You should be able to distinguish
oppression from pleasure.
Some pleasure is oppression
but then, that isn't pleasure, is it?
Some drugs induce pleasure
but isn't that oppression?

If you're immobilized you're oppressed.
If you're killing yourself you're oppressed.
If you don't know who you are
you're pressed.

■ ■ ■
A prayer candle won't always solve the confusion.
The go-go won't always take the mind off things.
Our lives don't get better with coke
they just—get away from us.

There doesn't have to be a bomb
if we make up our minds
we don't want to die that way.
We're told what's right from left.
We're told there is good and evil,
laws and punishment,
but no one speaks of the good in evil
or the evil in good.

You wanna sleep on my chest?
You wanna listen to my heart beat
all through the night?
It's the only jazz station
with a twenty-four-hour signal
if you wanna listen.
If you know what I mean.

IF HIS NAME WERE MANDINGO

He speaks good damn English to me.

I'm his brother, Carver.

He doesn't speak

that "dis" and "dat" bull

I've seen quoted.

Every word he speaks

rings clear in my head.

I don't suppose you ever

hear him clearly?

You're always busy,

seeking other things of him.

His name isn't important.

It would be coincidence

if he had a name,

a face, a mind.

If he's not hard-on

then he's hard up

and either way

you watch him.

You want crossover music.

You want his pleasure

without guilt or capture.

You don't notice

many things about him.

He doesn't always

wear a red ski cap,

eat fried chicken,

fuck like a jungle.

He doesn't always

live with his mother,
or off the street,
or off some bitch as you assume.
You give the appearance of concern.
You offer him twenty dollars
telling him it's cabfare
and discharge him from your home.
Your paths cross the next day.
You don't acknowledge him,
but he remembers,
his seed dilutes in your blood.
He doesn't dance well,
but you don't notice.
He's only visible
in the dark
to you.

BLACK BEANS

Times are lean,
Pretty Baby,
the beans are burnt
to the bottom
of the battered pot.
Let's make fierce love
on the overstuffed
hand-me-down sofa.
We can burn it up, too.
Our hungers
will evaporate like—money.
I smell your lust,
not the pot burnt black
with tonight's meager meal.
So we can't buy flowers for our table.
Our kisses are petals,
our tongues caress the bloom.
Who dares to tell us
we are poor and powerless?
We keep treasure
any king would count as dear.
Come on, Pretty Baby.
Our souls can't be crushed
like cats crossing streets too soon.
Let the beans burn all night long.
Our chipped water glasses are filled
with wine from our loving.
And the burnt black beans—
caviar.

HOMICIDE

FOR RONALD GIBSON

Grief is not apparel.
Not like a dress, a wig
or my sister's high-heeled shoes.
It is darker than the man I love
who in my fantasies comes for me
in a silver, six-cylinder chariot.
I walk the waterfront/curbsides
in my sister's high-heeled shoes.
Dreaming of him, his name
still unknown to my tongue.
While I wait
for my prince to come
from every other man
I demand pay for my kisses.
I buy paint for my lips.
Stockings for my legs.
My own high-heeled slippers
and dresses that become me.
When he comes,
I know I must be beautiful.
I will know how to love his body.
Standing out here
on the waterfront/curbsides
I have learned to please
a man.
He will bring me flowers.
He will bring me silk
and jewels, I know.
While I wait,

I'm the only man who loves me.
They call me "Star"
because I listen
to their dreams and wishes.
But grief is darker.
It is a wig
that does not rest gently
on my head.

BETTER DAYS

In daytime hours,
guided by instincts
that never sleep,
the faintest signals
come to me
over vast spaces
of etiquette
and restraint.
Sometimes I give in
to the pressing
call of instinct,
knowing the code of my kind
better than I know
the National Anthem
or "The Lord's Prayer."
I am so driven by my senses
to abandon restraint,
to seek pure pleasure
through every pore.
I want to smell the air
around me thickly scented
with a playboy's freedom.
I want impractical relationships.
I want buddies and partners,
names I will forget by sunrise.
I don't want to commit my heart.
I only want to feel good.
I only want to freak sometimes.
There are no other considerations.

A false safety compels me
to think I will never need kindness,
so I don't recognize
that need in someone else.

But it concerns me,
going off to sleep
and waking
throbbing with wants,
that I am being
consumed by want.
And I wonder
where stamina comes from
to search all night
until my footsteps ring
awake the sparrows,
and I go home, ghost walking,
driven indoors to rest
my hunter's guise,
to love myself as fiercely
as I have in better days.

SEVEN

SELECTIONS FROM *CONDITIONS* (1986)

LE SALON

Lowering my pants
before another mouth;
the cheap movie reel
rattles in its compartment
while the silent color movie
for a quarter
grinds around and around.
We pant in a dark booth.
The musk of hair
burns our nostrils.
I moan as his mouth
swallows me.
This is the first sound
in this silent movie.
Then he moans
giving the movie
its dialogue.

UNDER CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES

I am lonely for past kisses,
for wild lips certain streets
breed for pleasure.
Romance is a foxhole.
This kind of war frightens me.
I don't want to die
sleeping with soldiers
I don't love.

I want to court outside the race,
outside the class, outside the attitudes—
but love is a dangerous word
in this small town.
Those who seek it are sometimes found
facedown floating on their beds.
Those who find it protect it
or destroy it from within.

But the disillusioned—
those who've lost the stardust,
the moondance, the waterfront;
like them, I long for my past.
When I was ten, thirteen, twenty—
I wanted candy, five dollars, a ride.

WHERE SEED FALLS

Stalking.

The neighborhood is dangerous
but we go there.

We walk the long way.

Our jangling keys
mute the sound of our stalking.

To be under the sky, above
or below a man.

This is our heat.

Radiant in the night.

Our hands blister with semen.

A field of flowers blossoms

where we gather

in empty warehouses.

Our seed falls

without the sound or
grace of stars.

We lurk in shadows.

We are the hunger of shadows.

In the dark

we don't have to say

I love you.

The dark swallows it
and sighs like we sigh,

when we rise
from our knees.

O TELL ME, BRUTUS

O tell me, Brutus,
with corpses decomposing
in the river,
loved ones keeping fevers
quiet in city hospitals,
the backrooms locked and chained,
the police with new power to seize
and search our hearts, our kisses,
our mutual consents around midnight.

O tell me, Brutus,
what are we to do
with all this leather,
all these whips and chains?

NOW WE THINK

Now we think
as we fuck
this nut
might kill us.
There might be
a pin-sized hole
in the condom.
A lethal leak.

We stop kissing
tall dark strangers,
sucking mustaches,
putting lips
tongues
everywhere.
We return to pictures.
Telephones.
Toys.
Recent lovers.
Private lives.

Now we think
as we fuck
this nut might kill.
This kiss could turn
to stone.

BALLOONS

In black plastic bags
tied at the top
they were buried.
Their faces
swollen with death
rise in my dreams.
I was seventeen
when I read of them:
young boys, young men
lured to a house in Texas.
Their penises were filled
with excited blood:
first hard then soft they became
as Death with its blistered lips
kissed them one by one.
They were grapes
on Death's parched tongue.
In plastic bags
tied at the top
they were buried.
Twenty-five of them
and more unclaimed
young boys, young men.
For a long time
I was afraid
to trust loving a man.
For a long time
I retreated to women.
But it was like dancing

following a pattern of steps
painted on the floor.
Now, the awkward dancing is over.

For three days
I have walked
by a dark gray house
at the end of my street
where lives a man
out of whose home I have seen
young boys, young men
coming and going
coming and going.

And for three days
from the second-floor windows,
music from dusk to dusk
has fallen like petals
of black roses
softly to the ground.

But tonight,
evening of the third day,
I call the police
and tell them
not about faces
rising like balloons.
I tell them instead
about music,
about petals from black roses
falling softly to the ground.
Perhaps they will understand.
Maybe they will
come to my street
and knock at the door
of the gray house

where lives this man
I have not seen
for three days,
whose face is beginning to rise
in my dreams
like balloons.

ISN'T IT FUNNY

I don't want to hear you beg.
I'm sick of beggars.
If you a man
take what you want from me
or what you can.
Even if you have me
like some woman across town
you think you love.

Look at me
standing here with my dick
as straight as yours.
What do you think this is?
The weather cock on a rooftop?

We sneak all over town
like two damn thieves,
whiskey on our breath,
no streetlights on the back roads,
just the stars above us
as ordinary as they should be.

We always have to work it out,
walk it through, talk it over,
drink and smoke our way into sodomy.
I could take you in my room
but you're afraid the landlady
will recognize you.

I feel thankful I don't love you.
I won't have to suffer you later on.

But for now I say, Johnnie Walker,
have you had enough, Johnnie Walker?
Do-I-look-like-a-woman-now?
Against the fogged car glass
do I look like your crosstown lover?
Do I look like Shirley?

When you reach to kiss her lips
they're thick like mine.
Her hair is cut close, too,
like mine—
isn't it?

THE EDGE

I

I should have loved him forever
or put a bullet in his muthafuckin' head.

II

The past has made me
a good lover and a whore,
placed me closer to my fantasies
of being a beautiful Japanese boy.
My worldly charms exclusively sought
by connoisseurs of freak,
who worldwide know
I keep a small apartment
in a reputable neighborhood.
I am quietly kept
in a style
befitting a child of wealth.
If youth were longer
I could enter my manhood
a gentleman of nobility.
But instead I fight
with others like myself
for attention
I once squandered,
because I could not count
the minutes my youth

would sacrifice on vanity.
I exalted myself in a mirror.
Narcissus would have wanted
to see me reflected.
So now, in high-rise sympathy
I give myself
in foolishly thought
charity to men,
who are but mere reflections
of the die-hard dreams
I pass on to begging boys
whose names I forget
for the convenience
forgetting gives me.

Behind a wall of mirrors
I tell my skeleton of youth
I am beautiful.
I will endure.

III

You left me begging for things
most men thought they had
below their belts.
I was reaching higher.
I could throw my legs up
like satellites, but I knew
I was fucking fallen angels.
I made them feel like demigods.
I believed my mission
to be a war zone duty:
don't create casualties,
heal them.
But I was the wounded,

the almost dead,
helping the uninjured.
Men whose lusty hearts weakened
in the middle of the night,
and brought them to tears,
to their knees
for their former lovers.
They could look at me and tell
they did not want to endure
what beauty love scars give me.
So touch me now—
Hannibal, Toussaint.
I am a revolution without bloodshed.
I change the order of things
to suit my desperations.
You can raise your legs,
almost touch heaven.
I can be an angel,
falling.

BETWEEN PATHOS AND SEDUCTION

FOR LARRY

Love potions
solve no mysteries,
provide no comment
on the unspoken.
Our lives tremble
between pathos and seduction.
Our inhibitions
force us to be equal.
We swallow hard
black love potions
from a golden glass.
New language beckons us.
Its dialect present.
Intimate.
Through my eyes
focused as pure, naked light,
fixed on you like magic,
clarity. I see risks.
Regrets? There will be none.
Let some wonder,
some worry, some accuse.
Let you and I know
the tenderness
only we can bear.

HEAVY CORNERS

FOR JOE

Don't let it be loneliness
that kills us.

If we must die
on the front line
let us die men
loved by both sexes.

Don't let it be envy
that drives us
to suck our thumbs
or shoot each other dead
over snake eyes.

Let us not be dancing
with the wind
on heavy corners
tattered by doom.

Let us not accept
partial justice.
If we believe our lives
are priceless
we can't be conquered.

If we must die
on the front line
don't let loneliness
kill us.

the suspect
is in his early twenties.
a marine.
perversely sensitive g.i. joe doll
factory-boxed. battery-operated.
remote-controlled.
given guns
bombs tear gas.
an indiscreet license to kill anything
which threatens the state.
trained to live for this country,
these soldiers who stiffen
at the sound of a man's command.
these macho boys
clean-cut disciplined machines
hurl bricks and tear gas
into public gatherings of civilian men.
what do they fear?
if the men hold hands and dance
the world will not end.
if they love and part with the seasons
are they communists?
anarchists perhaps?
leftist urban guerrillas?
sexual terrorists?
do you fear their lovers
will snap their minds
and they'll go off killing

little boys in revenge?
just what is it g.i. joe?
is this the retaliation
of scorned love?

ROMANCE IS INTRIGUE

FOR ALEXIS

Amid conflicting reports
the truth emerges.
Coarse edged.
An ungentle blade.
For peeling back
the night's skin.
In no way an easy task.
It requires great strength
in the hands. A strength
not as obvious as muscles.
So I watch you.
Through the eyes
of people I love.
The good and the bad
they tell me, I hear.
I believe what I feel
moves unsaid in the air
between us.
This is not like trains
or lunch or gossip.
A brownstone gapped-tooth
griot girl like you
should understand.
This is not via satellite.
My arms are still attached
but empty.
You do not lay slain
in a lover's ambush.
Amid conflicting reports.

Satellite blackouts.

It is true.

Some of the people we love
are terrorists.

AMERICAN WEDDING

In america,
I place my ring
on your cock
where it belongs.
No horsemen
bearing terror,
no soldiers of doom
will swoop in
and sweep us apart.
They're too busy
looting the land
to watch us.
They don't know
we need each other
critically.
They expect us to call in sick,
watch television all night,
die by our own hands.
They don't know
we are becoming powerful.
Every time we kiss
we confirm the new world coming.

What the rose whispers
before blooming
I vow to you.
I give you my heart,
a safe house.
I give you promises other than

milk, honey, liberty.
I assume you will always
be a free man with a dream.
In america,
place your ring
on my cock
where it belongs.
Long may we live
to free this dream.

IN THE LIFE

Mother, do you know
I roam alone at night?
I wear colognes,
tight pants, and
chains of gold,
as I search
for men willing
to come back
to candlelight.

I'm not scared of these men
though some are killers
of sons like me. I learned
there is no tender mercy
for men of color,
for sons who love men
like me.

Do not feel shame for how I live.
I chose this tribe
of warriors and outlaws.
Do not feel you failed
some test of motherhood.
My life has borne fruit
no woman could have given me
anyway.

If one of these thick-lipped,
wet, black nights

while I'm out walking,
I find freedom in this village.
If I can take it with my tribe
I'll bring you here.
And you will never notice
the absence of rice
and bridesmaids.

NOTES

HEAVY BREATHING, pp. 4-19

"Do you think I could walk pleasantly and well-suited toward annihilation?" from "To Think of Time, #8," Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*.

Mrs. Catherine Fuller, "a petite 48-year-old grandmother was pummeled, kicked and violated with a metal pole as a crowd looked on." This brutal act occurred in an alley near Eighth and H Streets, N.E., within walking distance of her home. The attack occurred on the evening of October 1 1985, as she was on her way home from a nearby store. "Fuller Killers Bred by Mean Streets," *Washington Post*, 1/5/86, p. A-1.

"I go to the place where the good feelin' awaits me, self-destruction in my hand"; "I go to the place where danger awaits me"; "Flying high without ever leaving the ground"; "In the morning I'll be all right. I know I'm hooked on the boy who makes slaves out of men." All from "Flying High (In the Friendly Sky)," *What's Going On*, Marvin Gaye, copyright 1971, Motown Record Corporation.

"I am the love that dare not speak its name," Lord Alfred Douglas in Stephen Coote's *The Penguin Book of Homosexual Verse* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987).

CIVIL SERVANT, pp. 22-24

Dr. Eugene H. Dibble, Medical Director of the Tuskegee

Institute, and head of Andrew Hospital, appointed his supervisor of night nurses, a Black woman named Eunice Rivers, to serve as Special Scientific Assistant to the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment. The experiment was conducted by the United States Public Health Service (PHS) from 1932 to 1972 in Macon County, Alabama. Macon County Health officials, Veterans Hospital in Tuskegee, and the Tuskegee Institute cooperated with the PHS in systematically withholding treatment from subjects in the experiment who were local Black men, most in the late stages of the disease. The men were never told they had syphilis; they were told they had "bad blood." Three hundred ninety-nine had syphilis, and 201 were controls. They were poor, illiterate sharecroppers, tantalized by the offer of free medical care for minor ailments, rides to and from the health sites, hot meals, and burial stipends. Nurse Rivers served in her appointed position from the experiment's beginning until it was terminated. Adapted from *Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment—A Tragedy of Race and Medicine*, copyright 1981, James H. Jones.

VOICES, pp. 25–26

Erica Mendell Daye, a 25-year-old Black mother, decapitated, dismembered, and disemboweled her son, five-year-old William DeLoach. Investigators found some of the boy's internal organs wrapped in plastic bags inside the apartment's refrigerator. After the murder, Daye was found by police at St. Elizabeth's Hospital, a mental institution. Described as a PCP drug user, Daye repeatedly told authorities her son "is safe now" from the "demons" pursuing him. At her pretrial hearing, Daye described herself to the court as "an asset to the community" who should be freed on bond pending trial. "I don't feel like I'm a threat to the community," she said. "I always worked with the community and in the community. I've been going to the Park Road Church for five years.

I've done a lot of civic work. I understand the charges are very serious, but I won't run or hide. I will stand up before the court to prove whatever." *Washington Post*, 5/5/87.

DOES YOUR MAMA KNOW ABOUT ME? pp. 37-42

For additional consideration of my charge that Mapplethorpe's images of Black males are primarily images of objectification, his catalog, *Black Males* (Amsterdam: Galerie Jurka, 1980), contains the following images listed by page numbers: 9, 15, 18, 19, 37, 39, 45, 47, 48, and 49. The images cited all depict headless men presented as sexual objects. Further justification for my charges can also be found in Mapplethorpe's *The Black Book* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986). The "Man in a Polyester Suit" is specifically cited because that image of a Black male is one of his most well known. It might have been more appropriate to title it "Black Dick in a Polyester Suit," in that the emphasis is hardly on the suit or the man.

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