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April 19, 2011

To a Dark David

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ABSTRACT

To a Dark David

By April S.T. Walker

This collection incorporates a wide range of poetic influences in an attempt to ascribe aesthetic value to a part of history that is often deemed as unimportant or undesirable. While many older historians neglected to include stories that did not uphold a glorified portrayal of the South, contemporary historians have been concerned with reviving these forgotten histories – placing them alongside more traditional accounts, in order to present a fresh and more complete historical narrative. Like these current historians, I too am dedicated to giving a voice to those stories that may never get recorded in the limited space, and politically designed pages of a textbook. Whereas they do so through prose, I have chosen the vessel of poetry. The poems in this collection provide a lens through which to enter African American history – cautioning readers who think they've heard the story before to think again. These poems are designed to subvert the myths that have so often become our historical beliefs – grappling with the many intricacies of history, while at the same time maintaining poetry's aesthetic quality of beautiful, thought provoking language.

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Cowry Shell

(A form of currency made from the shells of mollusks)

Every night for two months, my father
read to me this fairytale –

The prince is an eighteenth century Bostonian gentleman.
The princess a slave poet; they sail to England.
She becomes the center of London society –

except that it is not a fairytale, more
an a-historical account or fictional biography,
something woven together from bits of truth;
a secondary source.

If I say around her neck
she wears a black velvet ribbon
threaded through a single cowry shell,
the slimy remnants of sea snail removed;

if I let her sit at the table with the master's son,
engage in a discussion of freedom
as he thumbs through the morning paper –

then consider this:

there is a way of justifying the past,
creating a myth from what was
real and what was
not, which can only be
accepted if you see it

not as history but fiction:

a genre contrary to reality which reveals
the taboos of it.

She will die at thirty-one, alone,
finally subjected to domestic labor.
Her works will never provide
her wealth, and so I write down

how like the shell around her neck
she was emptied of her *vileness*, threaded
through with English manners, education, then
presented as a commodity twice her original worth.

In the fairytale, England is again Boston
and the princess marries the prince's footman.

Talk to me, I want to say to her: tell me
where is the justice in a world which can reward
you with posthumous accolades.

Counterfeit fame.

Photo of a Boy Perched

- *Colored Cotton Carnival, Memphis 1937*

In the foreground, a boy,
his cheeks distended
and taut – an inflated balloon –

full of machine spun sugar,
fairy floss, cotton candy.
It spills from his mouth,
like stuffing.

Even now, mouth still overflowing,
he sits on a wooden banister,
like a deer on a taxidermist's table.

Solstice

No more bronze figure of a man we dare not touch,
no longer a vigilante, shading some children
warning others.

As a boy, my father saw
freckle-faced children in the park
skipping rope, playing tag.

He'd stroll along the sidewalk
one hand in his mother's, the other
running along the fence's iron bars, wishing

he too could splash in the fountain,
restore the moisture the hard
Memphis sun had depleted.

Today that same sun
which stood still over Gibeon –
rotation halted by Joshua's prayers

for a sign that they weren't forgotten –
shines on our picnic table, a few feet
from Nathan Bedford Forrest's ossified figure.

Triptych

- *After J.B. Debret*

1. OFFSPRING, 1837

She is painted here, with gold
bracelets, gold plated combs, and silk gowns,

sitting among the women. She is slave
but not negra – mestiza, mulatta,

mule child, a figure in limbo. Her blue
eyes, sapphires set in mud, denote

the contradiction of her class; those whose
shadowy skin, like the under-drawing

of a pentimento are visible
only under close examination.

2. WHAT SHE IS MISSING, 1832

Limpieza de sangre, blood purification.
She dreams of having a child,

a girl with hair a little softer,
a little wavier than her own

and eventually there will be another baby –
skin lightly golden – an erasure.

3. GRACE, 1820

The lord of the mill wanders through the shacks
aligned in neat rows of decaying wood,

packed mud, bits of brick. And from among
the sparsely clad children, he chooses one; a girl,

barely five, shortly to forget her mother, not yet
grasping the weight of the lord's

favor – no longer a *beast of the field*, soon
to become an *ornamental object*.

Her Color

does not come
back quickly. She

leaps from the car
running full speed

upstairs
to the bathroom,

her skin
the rich tone

of a Werther's candy,
is now scorched,

stamped by Mississippi's
sun. She scrubs

face first, arms
can be covered.

But it won't
budge, as if

the field's grime
has been etched

into her once
beautiful face.

To a Dark David

- after Karl Briullov

I. Musings

If David were
her servant, this
child kneeling
in the fountain
looking up
with Sambo smile –
as if to say, *what*
part should I clean
now?

if he had not
been king,
able with one order
to have
her husband killed,
unable
to act upon
his eye's lust
then
how would this story
be told?

II. Bathsheba Speaks

You are the one
I am bathing for.
Come to your rooftop
watch
then inquire of me.
I am Bathsheba.
I am pure.
I am not yours.

III. In Briullov's Studio

She ignores
the gaze of the black
figure crouching at
her side,
never taking her
eyes from the painter,

no notice
of the stealthy hand
placed on her thigh.

An attempt to
cast off customs
he paints her nude, arm
overhead.
Natural repose.
Her sensuous charm
set against
backdrop of stone,
lace sheets, bare black
body – shadow in waiting

Documentation

I hold my father's birth certificate.
I hold an official record of his parentage.

I hold a mother's decision, which alters my lineage.

These are the nineteen sixties.
A time when changes in social mores
parallel changes in law. Say that a child

is born, that it is a boy,
that his inherent duty –

to carry and continue the family name –
is locked between the dried ink
and paper of this document and

though other words and numbers fade,
adding a smudged look to the yellowing paper

one marking remains, unaffected by time's
wear and tear

of documented truths – testaments
to the validity of myths turned facts –

a single line through *Turner*,
Walker written above, the notary's
initials ending my grandfather's bloodline

permitting my father to always wonder
where the Turner name would have taken him.

Birthright

I had no twin
pulling at my heel
trying
to beat me
out of my mother's
womb,
only
an umbilical cord
twisted around
my neck –
oxygen
flowing from machine
to mother
to me.

Archaeology

In my last year in college
I set out
to write a poem on
the Civil Rights Museum. I had yet to realize

that this place devoted to the exhibition
of events past, was also preserving
a history demolished and buried,
waiting to be unearthed.

And when I came across the date, *April 4, 1968*
I saw that I was destined to be tied to this event
occurring 21 years and 1 day before my birth,
which I would not discover until my 21st year of life –
the age my mother was when she got married.

Peabody. Holiday Inn. Lorraine Motel. Names
of buildings altered by the passage of time. How
I remember them in the stories
of my mother, reclined on the couch
her mind already drifting
to the event she will relay. I can see her. I could say to her –

tell me again, how you lived
a block away from the *Lorraine*,
and your father was the landlord
of a rooming house that's now a grassy plot

tell me how rocks were thrown
through the windows of your school
when King was shot,
and your white teacher sang
Ole Dan Tucker
to distract you from the rioting
happening a block away,

how that same teacher comforted you
by saying, *if your mother loves you*
she'll come get you,
at the same moment she appeared in the door,
and your lasting memory of that Black Monday
is one of knowing that you were loved.

Elegy for the Housing Projects

- after Edward Hirsch

The housing projects in Memphis are vacant now –
Walter Simmons, Klondike, Linden...
 There are no record players in the bedrooms,
 no *Songs in the Key of Life* issuing from open doors.

The housing projects in Memphis are now condemned
 and so I parked in a parking lot with no cars.
 It must have been difficult evacuating hundreds of families:
 someone must have stood watch,
 making sure there were no stragglers,
 children still wanting to play hide-n-seek. Someone
 must have erected the *No Trespassing* sign at the entrance.

Apartment structures linger – windows with no panes.
 I stood outside the gates
 unable to see my grandmother
 stirring a pot of Irish potatoes and onions,
 her hair pulled back in a French roll.

Gone are the lawn chairs where mothers sat,
 plotting whose daughter would marry whose son.

Gone are the housing projects where the air held the aroma
 of hot water corn bread frying on the stove,
 and sounds of the Jackson 5 blaring from car stereos.

Gone are the innocent giggles of girls jumping rope,
 hoping to learn the initials of their sweetheart.

I am recreating the story of a world –
Walter Simmons, Klondike, Linden ...
 Come close and hear the laughter –
 the housing projects in Memphis are empty now –
 of those who thought they'd finally made it.

Iniquities

- after "The Scourged Back"

When I conjure up the image
of your back
laced with scars –
whelped skin
overlying
whelped skin –
your head turned to the side
not facing the camera
not facing me...

the muscles of my back
cringe, and I shake
my head as if to release
your image from my memory.

I take your picture
in my hands and stare
at the latticed pattern,
running my fingers across
the amalgamation
of scars, forcing your image
to sear my brain, hoping
by your stripes
we are healed.

Her Man

I have been half-watching the results
of the presidential election when the reporter says

in an even tone that all ballots are counted,
Obama has won – a fluke, I think

that will soon be corrected by a re-count. Republicans
would never allow a black man to really win, and so

I called my father to verify; he'd be watching
CNN on a 36-inch color television, which

would be far more reliable than the local
news I was watching on the fuzzy screen,

4-inch black-and-white television. Afterwards,
I would sleep, afraid that the morning

paper would confirm the mistake. Days later,
still unable to accept reality, I'd read an article

about my 106 year old great-grandmother – who voted
for the first time, and Obama was *her man*.

Conoco, 1999

It was not showing emotions I learned to fear but men,
foreigners who stood behind convenience store counters

and smiled. What did I know of those men;
only that their eyes followed me up and down aisles.

And so I did as my mother said:
say you want 20 on 2 and look for a Suzy Q.

I saw the rack of Hostess snacks lined with Twinkies
and Ding Dongs at the front of the store.

But instead I headed for the chips aisle,
feigning interest in Hot Cheetos and Munchos

stalling, until I was ready to say to the clerk –
with even voice and straight face – I want 20 on pump 2.

Battles

They swam around, drowning
like Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea – those spared
retreating up the white wall, disappearing behind the pantry door.

We found them huddled around a dime-sized pool of honey
and just when they'd reached our bag of potatoes, flour,
syrup, red flakes of cayenne pepper

rained from my mother's hand. She was no magician,
turning dimes and quarters on the car floor into lunch money
or yogurt-covered raisins on the Greyhound into delicacies,
alleviating whatever plagued us.

Fireflies

Tonight the air smells of fresh honeysuckle.
Hot dogs char on the grill. Already summer is
a time lost between illusion and reality.

This has been a summer of fireflies.
Their moment of eminence comes with the settling of darkness.
Then, they expose themselves in the air beneath the carport
and above the fence as a cursor. An interim.

The articles I read about them are full of myths:
demonic fireflies carrying torches and messages of death.
Their resemblance to burning cigars. How some carry light from the stars.

The moon is obscured. The patio door is tightly shut.
An early June breeze sweeps through the backyard. I sit beneath the oak.

Again they are beneath the carport –
weaving in and out of darkness towards a fence
full of green and white honeysuckle, too low to hinder them

they will ascend not realizing
the familiar territory to which they were confined
is now enlarged. They will explore –

I am exploring – the recesses of my mind and the possibility
which is the default of innocent hope:

that illusion can become reality. Vain wish.

And the fence's barrier over which they drift transforms
the reality of this illusion into a memory.

My Grandmother's Photos

I remember she sat upstairs
at the desk we'd given her for Christmas,
scraps of paper falling into the wastebasket
as she cut photo after photo.

She would take each one – copies
of originals – arranging them in her own
order, writing the name and year on the page
beneath. Sometimes she'd leave

an unwanted page on the machine, and I'd make
stories to go along with the images of great aunts
and cousins whose faces were distorted by color
lines running together like layers of sediment.

Study

I wish I could find that plump-cheeked little girl nestled
on the loveseat cushions in her father's study,

how she cherished those Sundays after night service
when everyone else was asleep and her grandmother,

exchanging church hat for red bandanna, would listen
to her stories of possessed dolls. I'd give anything to find

that cheeky girl again, rubbing her hands along the ripples
in her grandmother's skin, wondering why

the blue vein pattern in her grandmother's arm
was barely visible in her own.

The Peabody Duckmaster, Memphis, TN, 1940

Twice a day he escorted them – almost all
female Mallards, all ducks – as they waddled

from the marble fountain, onto the red felt carpet,
a disarrayed procession. He fell in behind them,

maintaining a respectable distance, fixing his gaze on
their every move, ready at an instant to redirect

one gone astray. Twice a day he took
his post beside the fountain, like a footman,

watching them alight from the watery fortress,
leaving wet webbed tracks, scampering along

to the jovial tune of the *King Cotton March*
echoing through the hotel's ornate lobby, mingling

with the crowd's laughter. No one noticed him
in his burgundy coat, lined with brass buttons,

his hands at his side, bringing up the rear.
The crowd watched in amazement, as the ducks

made their rounds with such discipline, *ooing* and
ahhing at the trained – trainer fading into the background.

Sacrifices

Rebel Inn, 1973

Sometimes I see her pushing a cart –
folded towels, crisp sheets, toiletries, piled high

obscuring her five foot figure. If she is tired,
her face shows no sign,
the skin above her brow is not yet

creased from grimacing. My mother
tells me this was the first of many

housekeeping jobs my grandmother would occupy;

picking up after those people who could afford
not to worry about their messes;

beaming with pride
when my mother marched across the field
as head majorette

in the uniform paid for
by soiled linens, because
my grandfather refused to sacrifice
his barber's wages.

Confederate Ghosts

There's an early memory that I carry around
 in my mind,
 like the *Under 21* lettering on my license
 bold, red, and capitalized, a classification
 that no longer applies
 to me but remains,
 positioned above my picture like a heading, title that I don't want
 but can't yet be free of...

A pickup truck kicks up dust as it skids to a halt.
 Two men emerge from the truck's cab.
 And I stand in front of the box set television,
 brows furrowed in a bewildered gaze
 eyes remaining fixed on the screen,
 not yet fully understanding why
 the men are hooded,

why they are dragging
 a young black man through the dirt
 forcing him to embrace an oak tree,
 by tying his wrists
 to its lowest branches.

One man stands off to the side
 holding a blazing branch for a torch,
 a halo of light reflecting off his white robe...

I remember standing there until my father's booming voice
 called out to me, *SoJ*:
 the suddenness of it breaking my trance
 as I turned to him
 wanting to run into his arms, unable to move.

I don't know why as we get older
 memories begin to merge, blurring the line
 between what really happened
 and what we've come to believe,
 as if to say the only things that are real,
 are those we've put faith in...

 The television is off.
 I am sitting in the center of my bed, listening to a cassette
 of children's voices singing *This Train is Made for Glory*

NOTES**“Photo of a Boy Perched”**

The photo appeared in the May 1, 1937 issue of “LIFE” magazine.

“Triptych”

After J.B. Debret’s *Visita a uma fazenda*.

The phrases *beast of the field*, and *ornamental object* were taken from *In Praise of Black Women 2: Heroines of the Slavery Era*, edited by Simone Schwartz-Bart and Andre Schwartz-Bart. The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002.

“To a Dark David”

After Karl Briullov’s *Bathsheba*. 1832.

“Elegy for the Housing Projects”

After Edward Hirsch’s “Elegy for the Jewish Villages.”

“Iniquities”

After “The Scourged Back” photo circa 1863, published in Harper’s Weekly.

The last two lines are taken from Isaiah 53:5 with a slight variation in pronoun: “...And by His stripes we are healed.”

“Sacrifices”

The Rebel Inn was a motel in Memphis, Tennessee during the 1970’s.