

Black Magnolias

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Table of Contents

Prose

- “Prologue to an Essay on African American Satire”**
by Jerry W. Ward 4
- “The Black Feminist Movement and Its Literary Sociopolitical Impact”**
by Naykishia Darby 10
- “Ahmos Zu-Bolton’s 1946: Allegorical Poeting to Make Meaning”**
by C. Liegh McInnis 18

Poetry

- “After Reading Cecil Brown’s Poem About
His Grandmother”** from *Southern Secrets*
- “Three Images from a Self-Photograph”** from *Southern Secrets*
- “A Son Remembers a Death and the Definition
of Naturalism”** from *Southern Secrets*
- “Epiphany at the Fast Food Restaurant”** from *Southern Secrets*
- “At The Club”** from *Southern Secrets*
- “No Heart in the Heartland”** from *Southern Secrets*
- “Bottomland Conversation”** from *Southern Secrets*
- “Algebra: or Signed Reflections on the
Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas Affair”** from *Southern Secrets*
- “On the Death of My Cousin Edward, Age 40”** from *Southern Secrets*
by Reginald Martin 25
- “For Phyllis Wheatley”**
- “A Melancholy Plant”**
- “On Sunday”**
- “Response to a National Study”**
- “Grendel’s African Nightmare”**
by Rukiyah 39
- “Silent Truth”**
- “Losing My Religion”**
by Michael Norris 47

Narrative

- “Auction and Seventh”**
by Zandria Robinson 51
- “Act One”** from *The Lost Navigators*
by Carlton Turner 57
- Contributors’ Bios** 64

Prose

Prologue to an Essay on African American Satire
by Jerry W. Ward

“It is not accidental that the disappearance of the human Negro from our fiction coincides with the disappearance of deep-probing doubt and a sense of evil.”

Ralph Ellison, “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Mask of Humanity”

Meditation on the Project

These are initial gestures in examining whether African American or black satire, as produced by such artists as Spike Lee (visual/aural) and Ishmael Reed (print), is viable in the twenty-first century. These notes assume that readers have seen *Bamboozled* at least once. In this investigation, viability entails more than mere capacity for surviving in the combat zone of artistic representation. Unless we are prepared to abandon the need for satire to have moral impact (agency in the adjusting of consciousness), we must anticipate in producing recognition, remorse, and appropriate action. Reader and spectator responses to art forms, however, may force us to identify new functions for old forms. Is human sensibility in the United States so dulled in 2003 that satire is impotent? Is satire a form of raw entertainment without didactic significance? Is satire so ingrained in African American cultures that its commercial performance is merely excessive? These questions do not yield to easy answers. In the absence of quantitative evidence, we can only theorize.

Spike Lee’s artistic choices in constructing satire, particularly in *Bamboozled*, might encourage us to think that modern sensibility in America is heavily sedated. And should we so conclude, we would only confess our being bamboozled. Lee sets the parameters for satire at the beginning of the film in such a way that the idea of moral function is held in abeyance. The narrator, Pierre Delacroix (Damon Wayans) enunciates definitions of satire that focus on the ridicule of folly or vice. We do not hear that satire may have a further objective, i.e. serving as a catalyst for improvement in human behaviors, or for punishment, as might be the case in some African settings. What we do not hear initially is clearly heard and seen in the course of the film in terms of debatable “improvements” and oddly motivated punishments: Dunwitty’s (Michael Rapaport’s) vernacular undressing of Delacroix’s pretentiousness, the snuff murder of Manray (Savion Glover) and Delacroix’s being murdered by Sloan Hopkins (Jada Pinkett-Smith). These brilliant satiric moments, however, may be overwhelmed by the multitude of satiric vignettes in *Bamboozled*. The spectator is tempted to see the film as satire on satire rather than as satire on social ignorance and despair in the United States.

When satire is genuinely functional in a society, when art and ethos are united, there is a “sense of full human dignity being shared by all members” of a “homogeneous, kindred” society (Okpewho 118). In 2003, it is rather likely that the ability of Americans to feel shame, outrage, or the necessity of supporting standards of behavior is severely diminished. People retreat before the prospect of human dignity. *You can’t keep it real, you know what I mean? if you invoke morality, you know what I mean? You do know what I mean! you know what I mean?* As a filmmaker, Spike Lee is on the top of his

game in terms of understanding his audiences. The absence of shared values in America and the reluctance of many black Americans to enforce communal values do justify, to some extent, Lee's refusal to champion satire as a moral instrument. Is it a matter of accident if his films awaken consciousness of a better way of being-in-the-world?

Lee is a brave and clever filmmaker. He is an African American satirist "who joins other American writers in scrutinizing the idealistic promises of American democracy, and often considers racism a sign that those promises are ultimately hollow. Yet African American satire spends less time upon protesting the existence and persistence of racism as a sociological phenomenon per se and more upon examining its effects, both direct and indirect, upon the African American" (Dickson-Carr 32). African American satire leaves open the possibility that contemporary black and multiethnic audiences may be in denial about what the effects of racism are. *Bamboozled* invites extended thought about the reception of cultural forms and the political implications of their racial histories.

Perhaps we have to deal with the real/ reel audience, the audience that has been historically and psychologically conditioned to miss the point. *Nigger thou art, and to nigger thou shalt return*. The audience feeds the idiot box. It is rare for the audience to analyze how it is being manipulated. Are we, with some outstanding exceptions, incapable of discriminating in American society between what is purely entertaining and what is insultingly entertaining? And are there sinister forces of no-color at work to ensure that colored people keep their ignorance real according to a program which does not apply to people of color? While one object of interrogation is the African American or FUBU creation of satire, the more important object is the question of power in the hands of people of no-color. What is the extent to which racially constituted audiences are able to get the point of satire with regard to matters of desirable social behavior and building or maintenance of communal values?

Spike Lee explores the power of visual representations in one joint after another, and *Bamboozled* is one of his wittiest examinations of master/slave relations on the mass media plantation.

The film begins with Pierre Delacroix's hypercorrect intonation of a dictionary definition of satire.

Satire. 1a. A literary work in which human vice or folly is ridiculed or attacked scornfully.

B. The branch of literature that compose such work. 2. Irony, derision or caustic wit used to attack or expose folly, vice or stupidity. [<http://blake.Prohosting.copm/awsm/script/Bamboozled.txt>, 2/15/03]

Already we have satire at the level of sound. The excess of talking correctly illustrates the lack of intelligence in trying to impress the world with the sound of intelligence. The film ends with the dying Delacroix (who perhaps has learned very little from the danger

and high cost of successful public entertainment) bidding the audience to tune in to the next episode of “Mantan: The New Millennial [sic] Minstrel Show.” As Ray Black accurately observes, “the cruelest cut should not mortally wound, which is the cruel cut of *Bamboozled*’s satire” (24).

The horrible joke is on us the audience, for we have indeed tuned in to a continuation of minstrelsy---the kind of representation we see in two advertisements --- the phallogocentric and sexist ad for Da Bomb, the drink that energizes your Johnson; stereotypical and oversexed (in the white mind) black men and women (or is it about dogs/dawgs and bitches/ho’s?) do the dance of commerce perfectly. The Timmy Hilnigger ad blatantly steals the phrase “keeping it real” and uses it as the motto of the ghetto. That ad also assumes that the consumer audience is pathologically stupid; the satire (or pure ridicule) exists in the voice given to the silence of the Tommy Hilfiger ads one might find in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Spin*, and *Vibe*. The horrible joke does bring the question of audience to the foreground. Are these commercials which are inserted within the frame of the televised coon show so shaped that the satire on beer ads (compare Da Bomb with Samuel Adams) and the satire on clothing ads fail to be either instructive or corrective? Is there in the film itself a confirmation that less than 1% of what is 24/7 on TV is worthwhile in the long range? After all, non-black or non-African American viewers can certainly suggest to themselves that “niggers” are precisely what the world says “niggers” are and be very well entertained and be very happy they are not all that (nigger implies). And some African Americans may totally miss the satiric import because mirrors do lie and the ads “keep it real” just like MTV. Can the master trump the slave who trumped the master?

While the ads are minor elements in the total structure of the Spike Lee satire project, they are excellent touchstones for everything else that gets aurally and visually represented in the film. They are starting points for thinking about audience and viability of forms in the 21st century, the new millennium.

Certain premises are more germane to the criticism of film’s appropriation of genre [satire as intentional form] than to print literature’s use of it.

Three Premises in the Project

1. Satire as a genre, both verbal and visual, exposes folly, foibles, vice, intellectual inadequacy, and other failures to live up to **communal standards and expectations**. Satire is one of the most shape -shifting of narrative forms, sprawling and assuming shape in accord with environmental and historical contours.

2. The objective of satire, by formal definitions, is to encourage correction of thought and behavior, usually for an audience which exists in a community governed by shared values and respect, however grudging, for the authority of tradition. Satire’s objective like any other can be misused; it can be an instrument for venting spleen, for inflicting abuse and unmeasured psychological damage. At the level of theory, I assume that the aims of satire are honorable. At the level of cinematic practice, I assume that

Spike Lee is holding up a mirror wherein we can behold just how **bamboozled** we are as we feed the idiot box and how the expression of genuine black creativity is limited by the power of mass media (which is certainly not controlled by black people). Consider how the television industry very successfully undermines Pierre's attempt to produce a show that would get him fired and undermines Sloan's desire to so encode the history of blackface minstrelsy in the medium of television, so that audiences would recognize its psychological horror. Once one is on the inside of an industry, even if one is on the margins of the inside, one's behavior sooner or later becomes less than exemplary.

If there is some failure in *Bamboozled* to expose the full deadly power of racism in American society, it may come oddly in that moment when one member of the Mau Mau says that he finds a segment of blackface buffoonery to be funny. Here is a fracture, a rupture. Within a group apparently committed to revolution is a member whose gut response exposes how ineffective symbolic acts of revolution might be in wiping out ingrained, socially conditioned habits of responding. Just as the satire or exaggeration exposes this single instance of backsliding from the ideals of revolution, it also exposes a functional weakness in satire as public form. Real and material conditions of human existence preclude the form's living up to all the promises of its definition.

3. Two conditions, among many, militate against the effectiveness or efficacy of satire at present.

First, potential audiences inhabit life-space that is more ideologically fragmented than it might have been in a previous century, more ego-privatized, enslaved to consumer capitalism, and blatantly indulgent of entitlements of self. This hyperbolic description of audience for satire overstates, of course, the discontinuity of community; it exaggerates the frightful possibility that "community" is an ad hoc social science fiction rather than an actuality. In plainer words, the phrases "black community," "Latino community," "Asian community" tend to be totalizing items of Alice-in-Wonderland language used by aliens of no-color. They [words] mean what we [humans possessing color] say they [aliens] mean----momentarily. They [the phrases] bamboozle listeners with political correctness. Perhaps we must now consider the ideal, invisible black community where, to borrow Ralph Ellison's language, a sense of evil yet prevails.

The next most crucial condition that puts the probable effectiveness of satire as genre in question is the fact that such oddly constituted communities may have dim memories of what shared values are. The displacement of "tradition" by the new may ensure that the designated targets of satire are received as entertainment rather than as matter of instruction and correction. One example is the excruciatingly painful Mau Mau parody in *Bamboozled*. We see that half-education and mere adoption of name does not guarantee that a group can be very successful in the business of genuine revolution. Although the Mau Mau group are perfectly fluent in Ebonics (and one can quote Frantz Fanon), they are ill-equipped with the language in which to conduct serious and critical strategic revolutionary planning. They are heavy on the matter of disrespect, but they do not recognize how haphazard appropriation of the Western name for militant, deliberative action in Kenya from 1952 to 1956 (the movement associated with Jomo Kenyatta, the

Burning Spear) disrespects moments of history in East Africa.

Disrespect that emerges from lack of thorough investigation of history --- this is Sloan's fear about unbridled use of minstrelsy--can be matched by disrespect that is backed by whitewash logic. For example, Dunwitty, the television executive, justifies his use of the word NIGGER by virtue of his being married to a black woman and having sired two biracial kids. Lee's creation this blacker-than-thou white male character is a brilliant satiric stroke, because his privileged disrespect for Sloan and Pierre and everyone else serves as a telling foil to Pierre's unguarded disrespect for Sloan in calling her the help; in Pierre's and Manray's stereotyped assumption that upwardly mobile black women have to sleep their way to success; woman's brain power and drive is overshadowed in their minds by her sexuality. African American satire does not allow us to overlook that black male sexism is called on the carpet by the fraudulent nobility of white male racism which black sexism imitates. Pierre is corrected when he mirrors Dunwitty in suggesting that the self-appointed expert on black folk, Ms. Goldfarb, purchased her authority by sleeping with a Negro not by earning a Yale Ph.D. in African American Studies. Dunwitty's (white) brute male instinct to save the honor of the (white) female kicks in. The scene exposes the racially-rooted power structure of the television plantation. If you (African American woman/man) are inside the media industry, you are still relegated to the margins, particularly by those who know you better than you know yourself. Power, Mr. Bones, is a beautiful thing!!!

In one sense, the film *Bamboozled* is a critique of ritual entertainment from blackface to contemporary niggerizations that depend on the device of self-hatred that has been written into the racial contract of the United States. The least offensive (to whom?) images are those that can be transformed into weapons of resistance (the yes mams and yes sirs that can become tonal guns) but the most offensive (again to whom?) images can be easily explained away as popular entertainment: they are not received as corrective social discourses.

The absent audience is the "ideal" audience, because it remains purely theoretical in our assessments of such cultural forms as satire. It is the audience some of us yearn to have membership in, because it includes shared behaviors and values. Unlike the flesh and blood audience from which we cannot extricate ourselves, the ideal audience is not narcotized by flash-frame overdose, the saturation and traffic of insult-images to co-opt the victims. It gets the point.

The absent audience does help us to separate the question of satire's viability from the question of satire's effectiveness. Satire is constituted by acts of recognition, but it is seldom the case in America that audiences change their behaviors. If the snuff television execution of Manray is a symbolic revolutionary act, is it symbolic in the same manner but lesser degree as the 9/11 execution of the World Trade Center towers? Or America's response to terrorism as it force feeds democracy to the people of Iraq as if they are geese who will produce *pâ té de foie gras*? Entertainment, Mr. Lee, is an ugly and beautiful thing. *You know what I mean?*

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The Black Feminist Movement and Its Literary Sociopolitical Impact by Naykishia Darby

In the wake of the Women's Liberation Movement, there was a new voice with which others needed to reckon, that of the African-American woman writer. While the middle class Caucasian woman had feminist voices, such as Nancy Chodorow, Jean Baker Miller, Janet Flax, and Adrienne Rich to speak for them; African-American women had no nationally nor internationally known vocal representatives. In the research that was conducted, the results showed an enormous emergence of Black feminist critical writers, men who were supportive of the Black Women's Liberation Movement, and an examination of the myths about the Feminist Movement. The literature produced by such writers as Patricia Hill Collins, Hazel Carby, and bell hooks gave new notice to the insurgent wave of Black feminist theorists. Their works have and still are paving the way for the new generation of African-American feminist voices.

"The heart of intellectual work is critical engagement with ideas. While one reads, studies, and at time writes, a significant part of that work is time spent in contemplation and reflection. Even though an exchange of ideas can and does take place in a communal context, there is necessarily a private solitary dimension to intellectual work." This is an excerpt from the work, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, written by Black feminist author, bell hooks. There is the belief that contemporary Black feminist theory has taken place in communal context, meaning that an intellectual's work does not have to be conformed to a sexist and racist society. The insurgent Women's Liberation Movement primarily established the liberation of the Caucasian woman, but what about her African-American sister? White feminists such as Nancy Chodorow, Jean Baker Miller, Janet Flax, and Adrienne Rich helped to uplift their white middle class sisters with their words; but women of color were left within the gap of those same words, thereby making necessary the emergence of the Black Feminist Movement. The Movement helped African American women to further establish their places in the work force, literary force, and forces non-domesticated, a change from the normal routine of their lives.

The African American female, historically, has not had the opportunity to express herself creatively, collectively, and literally. As the Black Feminist Movement continues to emerge, with women such as Patricia Hill Collins, Barbara Christian, bell hooks, and Hazel Carby, we find that the African American woman is continuing to establish her voice. The Movement helped to further put significant value upon Black feminist literary critics and theorists. There are more women writers, such as Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith and others, whose works have also played a significant role in developing critical theories. The research conducted discusses the extent to which the Black Feminist Movement has played a major role in the impact impressed on literary sociopolitical thought. A significant amount of Black literature and Black feminist literature has emerged since the inception of the Movement.

The results proved that the movement was influential in establishing the Black feminist writer and the literary sociopolitical thought of other women writers. The methodology includes the review of works written on feminist critical theory. The

researcher reviewed journal articles and reviews about the literature, looked at and noted the different types of critiques on the literature, and analyzed historical information regarding the Movement itself and the emergence of the Black feminist. This mode of analysis was the extent of the methodology used to conduct the research.

Women in America have been the constant center of oppression, whether political, sexual, or literary. White feminism helped white middle class women find their place in society. After the emergence of prominent feminists like Chodorow, African American women felt that they were capable of establishing their own brand of feminist literary criticism, which established the modern Black woman writer. White feminist critic, Nancy Chodorow states: “The centrality of sex and gender in the categories of psychoanalysis, coupled with the tenacity, emotional centrality and sweeping power in our lives of our sense of gendered self, made psychoanalysis a particularly opposite source of feminist theorizing” (Woolf 1).

Barbara Christian became one of the first well-known African American literary critics. In her work, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*, Christian discusses the images of black women in literature. She states: “The mammy figure, Aunt Jemima, the most prominent black female figure in southern white literature, is in direct contrast to the ideal white woman, though both images are dependent on each other for their effectiveness” (Christian 2). Christian critiques the images of the mammy, the whore and the tragic mulatto, all of which are negative images of African American women. She asserts that the negative images will always be constant reminders of the oppression that is ever-present in the lives of Black women.

Another important Black feminist critic is Mari Evans. Evans’ work, *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, provides insight about the establishment of Black women writers such as Alice Walker, Audre Lourde, and Toni Morrison. In the opening of her work, Evans states: “Historically, very little serious critical attention has been directed toward the creative energy and expertise of that large body of Black women who have provided the matrix for much of what is classic, what is significant, what is nurturing in the field of African American letters” (Evans xvii). There is the belief that because history is known to be repetitive, Black women should make their voices more clear as history continues to move on. Meaning, that as the new century evolves, Black women are going to have to continue to be an established front for academia and its literary tenets.

In addition to Black women writing about themselves, the Black male critic’s perspective also surfaced. Bernard Bell’s work, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, describes the emergence of the novel, the political of the writer and its cautionary reader. His discussion of the politics of the Black woman writer seems to be unmeasured. In his work, he writes: “Their liberation depends on the liberation of the race and the improvement of the life of the black community” (Bell 240). As the Black community attains its liberation, the community itself will rise and have improving developments that shall make the race just as efficient as white counterparts. One can safely come to the conclusion that, with the Black liberation, Black women will be able

to safely place themselves in the liberated category, also.

The character of Black women has constantly been torn down and degraded. We need to be re-strengthened to further help liberate ourselves. As the Black woman continues to emerge as a prominent and influential writer, there is one author who chooses to discuss the rebuilding of the Black woman. This author is Hazel Carby. In Carby's work, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, she wants the reader to become a critical thinker and re-establish his or her mentality to think positively about the African American woman. Carby asserts that the Afro-American women writer is the positive influence that society needs.

Patricia Hill Collins is also an established Black feminist literary theorist. Her persistence to help establish Black feminist intellectual thought has contributed greatly to the African American woman's thought process. In her work, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and Politics of Empowerment (Perspectives on Gender)*, she discusses the critical engagement needed to help establish the Black woman intellectual. In her work, she states: "Assuming new angles of vision on the definition of who can be a Black woman intellectual and on what constitutes Black feminist thought suggests that much of the Black women's intellectual tradition has been imbedded in institutional locations other than the academy" (Collins 15). For Collins to have such an evolving attitude about the thought process shows that Black women have the foresight to think critically and collectively. Though it is assumed that the African American woman can safely involve herself into the intellectual sphere, we find that Black women are placing themselves into an intellectual spotlight. Even as Collins brings forth the ideals of intellectual thought, some criticize her for her independent thought. Collins deals with the assumptions that Black women cannot carry themselves independently. In her work, she writes:

Starting from the assumption that African American women have created an independent, viable, yet subjugated knowledge concerning their own subordination, contemporary Black women intellectuals are engaged in the struggle to re-conceptualize all dimensions of the dialect of oppression and oppression as it applies to African American women. The exclusion of Black women's ideas from mainstream academic discourse and the curious placement of African American women intellectuals in both feminist and Black social and political thought has meant that Black intellectuals have remained outsiders in all three communities. (Collins 12)

As Collins' work helped to give political thought to Black women writers, her persistence to establish a new intellectual thought is foreseen. As Black women's intellectual tradition is beginning to become an important part of the literary academy, she can actively take her place among her critics as well her contemporaries.

Angela Y. Davis emerged as a prominent writer/activist of her time. Davis' work started as a silent voice of liberation, but she emerged to become one of the most influential feminist political activists fighting for equality, freedom of speech, and the

civil liberties afforded to the Black woman. Not only was Davis being an activist for the rights of Black women, she also led the population in political strength and gave them the power to liberate and stimulate their intellect. The Black woman has established herself with the use of several types of genre. To date, the Black woman is becoming the prominent poet, playwright, novelist, and essayist.

The Black Feminist Movement aided in establishing playwrights, poets, and novelists, such as Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, and Rita Dove. In the poem, "Africa," Maya Angelou compares the strength of the proverbial "Mother Africa" to that of the real mother of a Black child. Her strengths are portrayed with great imagery and fascinatingly real features. Alice Walker has established herself as the creator of the term, "womanist." This term is sufficient in describing strong feminists of color, along with women who feel that they go above and beyond their talents and abilities. Rita Dove's plays give the feminist flavor to make her male counterparts feel insufficient. These are just a few examples of the works that are important in the continuation of establishing the voices of African American women.

The essential Women's Liberation Movement opened many doors for the Caucasian women in America. As they were chanting for freedom, equality, and the right to do as they pleased, African American women decided that it was their time for liberation, also. The Black Feminist Movement grew out of, and in response to, the Black Liberation Movement and the Women's Movement. Contemporary Black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters. A Black feminist presence has evolved most obviously in connection with the second wave of the American Women's Movement, beginning in the late 1960s. In 1973, Black feminists, primarily located in New York, felt the necessity of forming a separate Black feminist group, entitled the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) (Smith 211). In an effort to meet the needs of Black women who felt they were being racially oppressed within the Women's Movement and sexually oppressed within the Black Liberation Movement, the Black Feminist Movement was formed.

All too often, "black" was equated with Black men and "woman" was equated with white women. As a result, Black women were an invisible group whose existence and needs were ignored. One great purpose of the Movement was for Black women writers to develop theory which could adequately address the way race, gender, and class were interconnected in their lives and to take action to stop racist, sexist, and class discrimination. Black women, who participated in the Feminist Movement during the 1960s, were often met with extreme racism. It generally took the form of exclusion; black women were not invited to participate on feminist conference panels that were not specifically about Black or Third World women. They were not equally or even proportionately represented on the faculty of Women's Studies departments, nor were there classes devoted specifically to the study of Black women's history.

In most women's writings, the experience of the white middle class woman was described as the universal "woman's experience," largely ignoring the differences in black and white women's experiences due to race and class. In addition to this, well-

known Black women were treated as tokens; their work was accepted as representing “the Black experience” and was rarely ever criticized or challenged. Building a Black Feminist Movement was not an easy task. Faced with the sexism of Black men and the racism of white women and men, Black women in their respective movements had two choices: they could remain in the movements and try to educate non-black and non-female comrades about their needs, or they could form a movement of their own.

The first alternative, though noble in its intent, was not a viable option. While it is true that Black men needed to be educated about the facts of sexism and white women about the effects of racism on Black women’s lives, it is not solely the responsibility of Black women to educate them (<http://www.mit.edu:8001/activities/thistle>). Despite the need for such a movement, there were few Black women in the early 1970s who were willing to identify themselves as feminists. Barbara Smith articulates the reservations of many Black women about the Black Feminist Movement:

1. The Black woman is already liberated.
2. Racism is the primary (or only) oppression Black women have to confront.
3. Feminism is nothing but man hating.
4. Women’s issues are narrow, apolitical concerns.
5. Those feminists are nothing but lesbians (<http://www.mit.edu:8001/activities/thistle>).

These myths illustrate long held misconceptions about Black women, including the belief that the extraordinary strength Black women have shown in the face of tremendous oppression reveals their liberation. Having decided to form a movement of their own, Black women needed to define the goals of the Black Feminist Movement (<http://www.mit.edu:8001/activities/thistle>).

Black feminist writings were to focus on developing theory, which would address the simultaneity of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classicism in their lives. Black women needed to develop a critical, feminist consciousness and begin a dialogue that directly addressed their experiences and connected to a larger political system (<http://www.mit.edu:8001/activities/thistle>). Black feminist novelists continue to take issue with males who try to theorize about their artistic creations. Male attitudes toward Black women’s novels have been characterized as apathetic, chauvinistic, or paternalistic. Black males’ attempts to theorize about Black feminist literature often betray a disturbing paternalism. Bell writes: “Their liberation depends on the liberation of the race and the improvement of the Black community” (Bell 240). As Bernard Bell makes this statement, he holds to the belief that as the Black race became liberated, then the liberation of the Black woman was soon to follow. Thus, as the public interest began to shift in the late 1960s from the rights of Blacks to the rights of women, publishers became more receptive to the voices of Black women writers, and novels by Margaret Walker, Rosa Guy, Mary Vroman, Louise Meriwether, Paule Marshall, Kristin Hunter, Caroline Polite, Sarah Wright, Alice Walker, Alice Childress, Ellease Southerland, Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, and Toni Cade Bambara (among the better known) were all published before the end of 1983 (Bell 240). As the voice of the Black woman

writer became more vocal, contemporary feminist writers such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Hazel Carby began establishing their literature.

One major issue with feminist authors was the discussion of how Black women characters were negatively stereotyped in the literature that has been published. The characterizations that seem to be a persistent plague on Black women characters were the images of the mammy, the whore, and the tragic mulatto. These images were prevalent in the early literature of male writers and some female writers. One author who openly rejected the negative images of Black women in literature was Barbara Christian. In her work, Christian states: "Before we move from the images of Black women projected in slavery and reconstruction literature, we must look at the images fashioned by another tradition, the oral tradition, the witnessing of Black people as seen through narratives and songs." To help make a positive image of Black women characters, writers who portray Black women in their works have to stray from the negative connotations put upon Black women characters. There has to be an establishment of critical theories and ideas put into writing by these authors. Political theories can also be influential in the improvement of the characterization of Black female characters.

The political theories that were established by Patricia Hill Collins opened new viewpoints and ideals for African American women. Her works focused on the intellectual thoughts of African American women and their literary achievements. Not only was Collins' work, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics* influential on other female writers, it also gave new ideas about what Black feminist writings should include. She gives new meaning to the terminology, "Black intellectual critical theory." Collins states: "The assumptions on which full group membership is based, whiteness for feminist thought, maleness for Black social and political thought, and the combination for mainstream scholarship, all negate a Black female reality" (Collins 12). As the new intellectual begins her journey into literary thought, she is maintaining her scholarly voice and staying grounded in literary success. But to continue to do so, she must reclaim her intellectual tradition. After successfully reclaiming her status, the Black woman can begin to efficiently put forth useful and intellectual literature.

Through their words and actions, political activists have also contributed to the establishment of Black women intellectuals. As the new political women writers are becoming influential, one author who established herself in the face of activism is Angela Y. Davis. Her politics showed no mercy to Black men who oppressed their women due to their sexist nature. It was her insistent force of words that further aided Black women in saying, "I know I have the voice to establish literary thought."

As the new wave of Black women writers is surfacing, we see more critics actually discussing the ideals of Black feminist theory and criticism. In *Black Women Writers*, Mari Evans stated: "What has happened in the past few years is a 'revolution within the Revolution,' one that was initiated by and has been sustained chiefly by Black women." The impact can be initially felt and retained for usage in all aspects of contemporary life and in the everyday mechanics of the world of arts and culture. It has

brought dimensions of strong emotions and analysis that were almost missing. There is a need for Black women and men to develop a critical style, which encourages further dialogue and development of ideas rather than merely trashing and silencing new Black feminist voices. Respect for fellow Black women must be developed and guarded in spite of sexist, racist, and classist cultural baggage, with which all Americans are weighed down. Difference among Black women must be acknowledged and affirmed, rather than ignored.

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Ahmos Zu-Bolton's 1946: Allegorical Poeting to Make Meaning
by C. Liegh McInnis

Aristotle asserts, as response to Plato's denouncing of the poet, that what makes the poet the supreme philosopher over the scientist or the historian is that the poet is equipped to answer the question "why" whereas the scientist and the historian can only answer the questions "how" and "what." The significance or difference is that "why" equates to meaning, and, according to Aristotle, it is the artist, not the scientist, who provides meaning to life. *1946* (Ishmael Reed Publishing 2002), a book-length poem by Ahmos Zu-Bolton, is the perfect example of this assertion of the poet as philosopher, i.e. griot. It is a poem in every sense of the word: epic, allegory, chant and theory. The core of Zu-Bolton's work, his poetry, his essays and his narratives, has always been concerned with the role of the poet to act as griot (healer, historian and visionary) for his people. Specifically for African peoples, the griot must reclaim his people's humanity by refuting the lie of Black inferiority. In much of his work, Zu-Bolton has given us the figure Blackjack Moses who acts as the griot of Black people. Yet, the interesting twist of *1946* is that Zu-Bolton himself takes role of primary teller and acts as the communicator or the critic for Blackjack. By telling us the stories (the what, how and why) of Blackjack, Zu-Bolton is also creating the didactic of the role and relationship between the poet and the critic, where the role of the critic is to inform the reader as to the how and the significance of the poet, and often in a poetic manner. So, in *1946*, Zu-Bolton and Blackjack are both in the poem with equal voices. In previous works, such as *Ain't No Spring Chicken*, Zu-Bolton is quite content to make Blackjack the primary persona or voice, but in this work Zu-Bolton is doing for Blackjack what Blackjack has always done for us--marking and measuring his significance. Zu-Bolton is the journalist, and Blackjack is the artist. Zu-Bolton is the reviewer, and Blackjack is the bluesman. "Blackjack challenged the very adventure/ of his youth/ ...and I had to explain to Blackjack/ that even if we were old enough/ we still couldn't vote, not in DeRidder,/ not in the whole of the South/ in 1960." Of course, Blackjack eventually wins this debate between the soul (Blackjack) and the body (Zu-Bolton), proving that the poet is the other self--the one who pushes us to observe new realities and possibilities and to make these dreams real. "so one night against all that segregation/ taught us, Blackjack/ rushed over to my house, round the bend/ cross railroad tracks, thru the alley/ and whistled over the back fence" Zu-Bolton asserts that it is those who respond to the poet's call, even against our fears, who have the most fulfilled lives. "I climbed quietly out my window/ so I wouldn't wake my parents." While still a young man, Zu-Bolton takes up the spirit within him (Blackjack) and takes the challenge and journey of following the poet inside of him. This work affirms that they need each other. Blackjack takes us to the clouds to show us our infinite possibilities while Zu-Bolton holds our feet to the ground, chronicling our journey--our success and our failures.

The strength of *1946* is Zu-Bolton's masterful imagery and his ability to handle a tri-narrative. The images are so vivid that they are almost hieroglyphs. The work is a puzzle where we are given illustrative bombs that explode meaning into our minds, pushing us further along the journey. "...Mississippi, in 1946/ ...was the outhouse of the Americas/ in the year of our Lawd, nineteen hundred/ and forty-six." The fact that

Mississippi has been home to some of the most powerful literary voices speaks volumes for the legacy of Black courage, will, and intellect. This image also reminds us that any poet who speaks about or against Mississippi is innately speaking about or against America since Mississippi is the model that taught the country how to enforce and maintain Jim Crow and segregation, the most modern example being Trent Lott's ability to rise to Speaker of the House. So when Lott was speaking/promoting/affirming the tradition of Mississippi, he was speaking/promoting/affirming the tradition of America. In the same manner, when the Black southern poet is speaking about the hell of the South, he is speaking about the hell of America. Zu-Bolton laces the rest of the book with the types of images that, by themselves, weave a tapestry of colorful pictures of thoughts and emotions that construct the allegory. "1954 destroyed the world/ that Blackjack had come to know/ 1954 rose up to become the crossroad that bridged/ the rest of Blackjack's life." From 1954 to the present, Blackjack, the poet, would spend the rest of his life making meaning of this and many more events and changes, and Zu-Bolton coordinates Blackjack's images into the scrolls of our lives.

In the chronicling of the journal and journey of Blackjack and Zu-Bolton, *1946* is a personal piece because it is a literal chronicling of the actual life of Zu-Bolton. The events discussed are real, but the chronicling serves a dual purpose for Zu-Bolton: to gauge his own (personal) legacy and to gauge the legacy of the Black poet as bard and griot. At the core of the work is Zu-Bolton's assertion that the job of the griot is to tell our stories so that we never forget from where we have come and what it took for us to get here. More importantly, we must remember that memory and consciousness are the greatest tools against our enslavement and human deterioration. Thus, this chronicling shows us both history and memory, where memory moves beyond the mere retelling of facts to an act of providing prospectus as well as an act of reclaiming oneself by telling one's own story.

"Blackjack moved in and/ became our secretary/ he took us back to our youth,/ the race thru the trees,/ the feeling of real freedom, the wind/ carrying us as we jumped the creek, our first discovery/ of the house/ and the painter who lived there/...Blackjack reminded us of those old stories,/ those long-ago days before we unearth Shango,/ before we found Ra/ and Blackjack's writings became our Orishas/ our memory banks, and we all took folklores from his pen/ in their own way"

The poem is a circular odyssey from the South to the North and back to the South and from internal to external and back to internal, where we study the development of Blackjack and Zu-Bolton as men and writers as we discover the development of African Americans as a nation and the development of America as an ongoing plot and antagonist to Black evolution. The painter who lives in the newly found house is the poet who has the job to create and recreate the world that we need--the world that lies deep within the soul of humanity. "he spoke thru/ Blackjack's pen, time turning the pages/ of the book he was always writing, the sky/ he was always painting." Thus, *1946* is the chronicle of Blackjack Moses as the poet/painter within Zu-Bolton and the manner in which Zu-Bolton has had to come to terms with his inner poet and the role of that inner poet.

There are several stories within the narrative of the poet (soul) and his body, and Zu-Bolton strings each story into the next, with each story revealing a figurative piece of the metaphoric and allegorical puzzle of life's meaning and the role of the poet to show us that meaning. "‘til Blackjack told me the story of the gate/ which was his fate:/ *there are some stories that carry the weight/ of generations, stories humane and inhumane, bloody stories/ detailing sin; Blackjack knew stories*" This work is allegorical in that Blackjack is Dante's poet chronicling our physical reality and our metaphoric meaning. Blackjack does not just give us dates and events, but his historical recollections are poetic reflections of our struggle, evolution, being and worth. 1954, 1960, 1964, 1973, 1976 are more than just points on a timeline; they become instruments by which to gauge our journey. These dates and the factual and metaphoric events with which they are impregnated are apex moments in the life of Blackjack, Zu-Bolton, African Americans, and America. Thus, *1946* is an allegorical epic whereby the poet, Blackjack Moses, is the symbol of humanity's and a nation's deep, inner spirit, trying to penetrate and break through and free from being buried beneath the vile soil (physical body and law of the land) of America. Accordingly, Blackjack's (the poet's) stories inspire stories in us, make us remember what we had forgotten, and make us see what we were too blind to see because we have overly embraced the physical and rejected the metaphysical--especially our beauty, worth and a the possibility of a glorious future.

"when Blackjack told the story of the gate/ it was a light going off in my head./ this was more than another Blackjack tall tale,/ he made me believe in that gate/ tho I am a nonbeliever/ the gate became the scared door/ into all my tomorrows/ this gate where I could flow thru gardens/ surf the sands of time pull up the roots and images/ of ancestors creating wild answers to ancient questions/ preaching love in a hateful world"

The griot of African people recalls a time and place that affirms his people's beauty and worth, "Realized the colored world/ was all the kingdom/ he could offer his son" So, Blackjack as poet provides for us an alternate world to the nightmare of reality. "(so what if I am blueblack, so what if I am po?/ ...I can still dream about freedom,/ I can hide in my world/ ...and Blackjack became heroes he knew about/ but couldn't live,/ ...so hiding inside himself was/ Blackjack's way of growing up" Blackjack's hiding "inside himself" is not to be read as passive escapism. It is to be read as an active rejection of the European lie of Black inferiority and the active attempt of the poet to refashion another existence for Black people.

Yet, Zu-Bolton is careful not to romanticize his journey or the journey of any poet or the relationship that the poet (the soul) has with society (the body). Zu-Bolton sites the moments when we are at war with our poets, when our physical and our principles or the principles of our physical do not jive with the principles of our metaphysical. "it was the war years, Viet Nam/ and 'hell no/ we won't go' protest, civil rights/...what happened was/ I answered the call of my country/ when the time came, and Blackjack true to his word, went off to Canada/ or some place" This passage displays Zu-Bolton's mastery of imagery because it is figurative on many different levels. On the one hand, we have the

clash between pragmatism and idealism: a citizen/soldier should serve his country even when he does not necessarily agree with his country versus the notion that one's ideals and principles are too important to fight in an unjust war for the mere sake of getting along with his society. This is complex because millions of dislocated Africans are always forced to make this choice whenever America goes to war. How does one fight for a country that hates him? The way that most African Americans answer this is that accepting military duty is one part of the fight to make America a truly free nation. And it is this complex issue that Zu-Bolton tropes to articulate the manner in which the ideals of the poet (as philosopher) often conflict with the ideals of the society. And even further is the battle of Blacks who are tired of being the thankless voice of morality, especially when the moral people never receive any rewards and are the first to be persecuted. Yet, Zu-Bolton does not present this clash between he and Blackjack as an act of damnation. This is presented as difficult but necessary truth. The job of the poet is always to tell the truth and make the most difficult declarations and decisions. "and the spirit of that blind painter taught us time/ and time again, 'this is the color/ of the godawful truth,' he spoke thru/Blackjack's pen..." Individuals, groups, and especially artists who want to evolve must undergo these internal and external battles. Being at war with our poets (and poets being at war with themselves), which is to be at war with our ideal selves, is only natural. "...he dropped out and back into my life before I knew he was gone." The physical always wonders if it has the capacity to ascend to the heights that the ideal proposes. "I doubted Blackjack and his damn promiseland,/ I doubted peace and poetry." Moreover, the physical always wonders if the reward of metaphysical ascension is worth the turmoil of the struggle. Zu-Bolton gives us this clash between he and Blackjack as way to show us that this is natural and that we can survive it, and if we survive it we will grow and evolve. Of course, the most difficult truth to tell for the African poet dislocated in America and the most difficult truth for whites in America to grasp is that America is what it is because it is founded on slavery. "when slaves were captured,/if there was no reward, some/ were sold/ and others kept on to work the nearby/ sugarcane fields/ that's how DeRidder was born,/ a slave-catchers camp 17 miles from the Sabine river." So, in the same way that Zu-Bolton is forced to accept that his clashes with Blackjack are a natural part of their healing and growth, so must America accept that its history will continue to create chaos and turmoil if it does not reconcile itself. Or more specifically, America must accept that it needs critical and courageous poets, such as Zu-Bolton, if it truly wants to evolve to be a better place. This image is, then, another example of the poet as philosopher, pinpointing our problems so that we may solve them and grow. Specifically for the Black poet, he must, in the face of fire, articulate that when America stifles Black growth it is stifling its own growth. It is the keen poetic eye of Blackjack who is able to put his eyes and hands in the bowels of New Orleans's turmoil and make sense and meaning of it. "'New Orleans wants to growup,/ become an adult city,' Blackjack said, 'but New Orleans is still in Louisiana/ an that's the problem.'" Where others merely see and proclaim miscellaneous events and happenstance, it is the poet who can coordinate the events and reveal a meaning of them. Blackjack informs us that the problem of New Orleans is symbolic of the history of freed slaves from Atlanta to Chicago (Black enclaves) trying to become adults (citizens) on the master's plantation.

By 1976, Zu-Bolton and his ancestors, through the coordination of Blackjack, are

reunited so that those of us in the present can carry on the work and pass it on. "I carried the bones of some old slave/ who came within 17 miles of freedom/ only to be captured/...but 1976 was not a poem,/ it was real life/ and the bones of that old slave/ was all that I had." So, by 1976 memory, after Jim Crow, after Brown vs. the Board, after the Montgomery Bus Boycott, after the slaying of Medgar, Malcolm and Martin, after integration, is all Zu-Bolton has to protect him because African Americans had giving up everything else that they had created and owned for the white lie of integration. Thus, the griot begins with memory to remind, recreate, and re-envision a better world for his people. And with this memory, Zu-Bolton and Blackjack had come to a place in their lives where they could call other griots to aid in this remembering, reaffirming and refashioning. "what would happen if we invited/ a bunch of untamed witchdoctors and griots/ to make fiesta with the local seers and rootworkers/ and call it a hoodoo festival/ on Galveston Island/...the mythical festival." Yet, Zu-Bolton is not just remembering this time in his life for the sake of self-praise. The remembering is the core of the entire work. *1946* is Zu-Bolton measuring his life's legacy as much as it is teaching the type of legacy that Black writers should seek to leave. "I was starting to wonder/ if I was a poet, or poem." This is the ultimate question of the book, the ultimate question of the writer--the difficulty of being in the work or being the work and, at the same time, trying to discuss and measure the usefulness of the work. "I was learning to paint/ the small-town in me/ coming alive in the rainbow, the island/ my canvas, memory working/ the colors of my muse."

In each movement, Blackjack is the poet, as spirit or magical explorer, going where the body fears to tread. Blackjack is the idea whose time often comes before the body or the society (Zu-Bolton) is ready for it. That is why at every change, Zu-Bolton is either led or called to a new place by the spirit of Blackjack who is already where Zu-Bolton finds himself. "Somehow I knew Blackjack was in California/ before I got there, in 1970." In this manner, the poet is the visionary taking us places where our physical would never go. For instance, after so long a struggle to find a place like DC, what Zu-Bolton considered his paradise, "DC was too good to be true,/ funding for the arts, a good witchdoctor/ could make a living chanting native tongues/ and calling it poetry/ my DC had hope, against apparent hopelessness,/ had almost enough hoodoo to save me," it would seem inconceivable that Zu-Bolton would leave his DC paradise, but Blackjack (the poet healer and visionary) knew there was more work to be done elsewhere that others needed. "but Blackjack wouldn't even let me/ lie in peace, said New Orleans/ was near enough to Mississippi/...he told me about a bookstore/ he once visited,/ off the beaten path, tucked away/ ...you had to go looking for that store/ Blackjack told me." The bookstore was not a real bookstore but a vision that Blackjack was giving to Zu-Bolton to make a reality. Blackjack knew that Zu-Bolton would not be fulfilled in DC because his mission was not to get rich off his work but was to use his work to make the world better. "you had to go looking for that store, Blackjack told me, go looking with the patience/ of the elders, and the hunger/ of the young/ ...we might save the world of letters, Blackjack believed,/ and the real world too." By being this visionary, the poet also becomes the voice of the hopes and dreams of the people. "me and Blackjack were the voice, some country nommo/ And we called out to the bones of warriors struggle, we called out the manchild/screaming within us, we called out from the cradle/ on the edge

of the village.” Thus, this voice of the poet is that of the griot who has the ability to converge the people’s past, present, and future into the apex of a glorious now. “and this voice became our sacred calling/ our birthing kin,/ and we gave it the wings of our time/ and the witchdoctor theatre called out to us/ from this new dawn/...till Blackjack left us traveling some ancient road.” Zu-Bolton traces our history by tracing his history, making meaning along the way. *1946* presents us with a challenge and a charge of what we should be doing with our talents by showing us the work and legacy of the griot.

To order a copy of *1946*, contact Ishmael Reed Publishing Company, P. O. Box 3288, Berkeley, California 94703.

Poetry

After Reading Cecil Brown's Poem About His Grandmother
by Reginald Martin

. . . what I really wanted to tell you was . . .
read your poem 100 times the first night I got the new issue of *Quilt*;
read it standing up, read it sitting down,
read it and reread it again, read it aloud,
with my mouth hanging open, breathing hard.
Wanted to tell you that her death was painful for me too.

I wanted to tell you that I had had a grandmother too;
had three as a matter of fact, though one was a man,
but, then, everything you love gets turned into "grandma,"
grandma does all the things nobody else can.

I wanted to tell you to send me a new copy
cause I . . .--the part about god letting her into
heaven cause she was the best--
that part got wet,
cried cause I knew what you meant
cried cause I had been loved by Lucinda,
Carrie, and Les.

I wanted to tell you
I had the same problem you had for the same reason:
I did not believe, wasn't sure,
cause I had seen what happened to the three people
I loved the most,
who believed in god more than life,
and it wasn't pretty.

But I put your poem under my pillow
and got on my knees and prayed and prayed and prayed anyway,
cause heaven was where they had always wanted to be,
and, surely, now,
they would get what they had loved so faithfully.

And I wanted to tell you something you already knew--
grandmothers are better than we are;
they appear on the scene to make us know
what love is all about,
so we can spend the rest of our lives remembering
what love really is,
and remembering:
people working 2 jobs to buy you milk
real cloth diapers

birthday parties and chocolate cakes
 Roy Rogers guns and holsters
 peeled oranges
 candy apples
 aprons full of cracked pecans
 jack-knife-cut cheese slivers
 picnics
 your first wide-mouth bass
 pinto beans and corn bread
 lunches packed and ready to go
 your first reading session
 your last free kiss
 Easter programs
 punch with orange sherbet
 piggy-back rides
getting covered up as you fall asleep trying to watch *Godzilla*
 being told where the hidden Christmas toys are
 before you can look for them
 eating watermelon on the front porch,
 and quilts. . .
so we can spend the rest of our lives remembering them,
so we can spend the rest of our lives looking for
that kind of love again,
or trying to give that kind of love, again.

I wanted to tell you
that since they're better than we are,
they're magic.
Yours was in your hand,
hovering over you as you wrote her poem.
She hovers over you still.
Mine hovered over me as I wrote these words.
They hover . . . they always will.

You brought my 3 back to me.
 And
 what I really wanted to tell you was
 what I really wanted to tell you was
 what I really wanted to tell you was
 thanks.

Three Images from a Self-Photograph
by Reginald Martin

1. PLACE

Tonight I have on a pair of black bikini briefs
a red sweat-shirt the color of the flesh of a Texas grapefruit,
I think to myself, "Aren't those the colors of the flag of Mexico?"
I think not.
But how appropriate that I think of Mexico,
because tonight I am thinking of you,
those trips to San Miquél,
the photographs you take there,
the people and the bulls,
and a look on your face from your self-photograph that says,
"This is where I want to be."

I am thinking of you tonight.

And I think again, it is not so much the place,
as it is a feeling of mind
that keeps you so contented, so dissatisfied.

Your face says, "I feel comfortable here."
Your face says, "I look good smoking this cigarette."
Your face says, "I take sexy photos of myself."
Your face says, "I like you."

I am thinking of you tonight.

Your thoughts grab me around the waist,
where the two colors of my Mexican flag pajamas meet,
and my mind says, "Yes."

2. TIME AND DREAMS

Before we knew each other's last names,
before we had had a drink,
before we had ever said ten words at one meeting,
before we ever wrote letters,
before we ever slept together,
and I knew the luscious mole on your back
every beige crevice that leads from your curved bottom,
so like a warm and soft blue Matisse,
up the curve of your back to your hard shoulders
that end in a turn just below your brown eyes,

so full of light,
and more natural than the quiet forest they imitate,
where your mouth blooms full in Spring,
I dreamed you.

And we talked all night
in a restaurant of polished white and silver,
I in my sleeveless blue and black shirt,
trying desperately to remember lines of poetry,
and you in a purple satin bodice,
talking quietly, quietly about art and photography.

3. SELF-DESCRIPTION AND NARRATION

Your self-photographed image now rests on my dresser.
In a silver frame, you lean against a white and gray wall,
that is more the blinding remainder of the wake your comet has left
than it is a solid thing.
In the present, a striped pillow braces you against the wall of light,
and your draping, brown hair, pushed to your right side
to hang to your covered breasts,
does not fly back in your cosmic rush.

Seeing beyond the frame, your eyes envelop my bedroom,
always keeping me in the center of their vision.
Bare shoulder points a photographer's eye
to a sundress of combed white cotton,
which does not move, which does not rustle,
as a calf as smooth as jade
glides beneath the silver frame.

In the future, this strong and fragile face
of an Andy Warhol heroine
will push its way through my bedroom walls.
It cannot be contained here.
But I shall hold onto that wall of crackling light,
so I shall be, always, within its silver boundaries.

A Son Remembers a Death and the Definition of Naturalism
by Reginald Martin

No hope.

The horror is this poem came to me weeks before he died.
Don't know about him, but clear to me, this time,
we would not return from those empty halls and white sheets together.
No. There was no hope,
and I knew.

He lay at home.

He lay there for over a month without a word,
popping those goddamn pills and smiling when I asked him how he felt.
"Pretty good this morning," was always his reply,
even when his whole body shook in pain,
and his eyes watered even as he tried to usher me
out of his bedroom with smiles.

I saw him.

Knew not what to do as he sat there wasting away,
staring at the wall, head sunken,
swearing that he was doing all right.
Could have grabbed him, shook him,
ripped his pajama bottoms off to see the truth.
Dared not. Too many years of earned respect forced me to accept.

He silently refused.

He would not see more of his body taken away.
When they took part of his leg before,
the loss almost killed him.
Then there he was: the shortest, toughest man in Memphis,
hopping along on his crutches.
No. Fight it out. The next time he had to go,
it would be in one piece, altogether.

Then that smell came.

His wife refused to sleep in the room.
Thought it was the pot before, but this time I was sure.
Too many rotting animals in the fields
not to know the stink of rotting flesh.
No, not the pot, not the rug,

not loose shit unseen by the cleaning aunt.
Oh! It is you! It is you, my father!

I helped him up.

Cleaned those horrible, horrible wounds.
Black, green, gaping horrible ugliness,
with the white gushing forth as I cleaned,
washed that terrible bed, his clothes.
Dressed the wound so white and fine.
He took it off himself.
No poultice for one who rubs and rubs all night.

Scooped him up.

He lay there.
Nothing was better.
“The car sure is running good,” was all he could say.
It was a Saturday night in that emergency room.
And he groaned and groaned.
He wanted a cigarette that I never gave.

Then that next night I was certain.

Those screams . . . those screams:
“LORD HAVE MERCY, LORD HAVE MERCY.
HAD IT HARD ALL MY LIFE LORD. SO HARD LORD.
WORKED HARD ALL MY LIFE. LORD HAVE MERCY!”
After getting me to calm him down,
the nurses forced me out.

Then passed two months.

Did not get his wish. Took the whole hip this time.
He said, “The Lord knows the wheat from the chaff,
that’s why I’m still here.”
And the aunt smiled and nodded.
And he cried, and I turned away,
and I knew,
among those hardened strangers he would die.

Could not face him that last day.

But I spoke the day before and said all I had to say
about love and care and paltry efforts.
And he smiled and he talked plainly,

“Well, when you do all you can do . . .”
He sent me for a paper.
When I returned he had slid to the center of the bed.
Pain and derangement being what they were, he sang and smiled.
Placed the paper on the end of the bed and walked swiftly away.

It was 5:30 on a Tuesday morning.

And he writhed and died among all those hardened strangers,
as I had known he would,
leaving behind a wife, a mortgage,
a surreal void of emptiness, pain, love, and grace,
and a son, hopelessly awake at night,
who remembers and writes of his death.

Epiphany at the Fast Food Restaurant
by Reginald Martin

Promising smiles and glances for six years,
but--face to face--only masked-exchanges of the heart.
Never knew what she had been trying not to tell me.
But now, there, in front of all three grown-ups
were the three little reasons that had kept us apart,
running around the salad bar, asking for tomatoes and peas.

Me, I just stood behind the bacon bits, alone and relieved.
As the babies by other men screamed for more Pepsi,
I sighed,
“Ah . . . her separating, cement secrets are these.”

At The Club
by Reginald Martin

Friday night,
Svelte Tigers in such wild positions.

Paper mâché heads turn and gape.

No Heart in the Heartland
by Reginald Martin

Yes.

I know how you felt, Henry Hudson,
looking everywhere for an outlet,
again and again finding only towering mountains
and endless flatlands of white ice.

(Unlike you, given the chance, I will turn back, turn back, not try again.)

I told a joke there once,
and lost amidst the group's attempts to make everything literal,
their inability to know satire,
and my desire to be accepted,
were my own metropolitan words,
drowned out by white noise, white silence.

Once I was sure there was a western passage,
sliding through the coldness and wastelands of middleness,
to explode into the Pacific,
the Other Side,
the ocean of warmth . . . and chances.

But I am floating now, adrift.
Those loyal are put into a boat with me,
and we are untied, laughed at and abandoned,
left to search for that which never existed,
on our own.

Bottomland Conversation
by Reginald Martin

“I’m at the point where *everything* matters,” she said.

As her words made me blink,
I noticed the August sun going down.

Algebra: or Signed Reflections on the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas Affair
by Reginald Martin

A negative times a positive is a negative.

A positive times a negative is a negative.

A negative times a negative is a positive.

A positive times a positive is a positive.

* * *

A zero times a zero is still just two zeros times nothing.

On the Death of my Cousin Edward, Age 40
by Reginald Martin

to say that it was not a life like any other
filled with ornate rings and scholarship offers
consummated skirts and not enough money to fend for the family

to say that it was not the life he wanted to live
of endless brown legs turned in a V toward him
on Friday nights after work at the segregated restaurant
not a series of endless backrooms in a 3-room house
pressing hard against the door jamb
girls with names like Cookie and Pearl.
not one endless graveyard of parked Chevys
55s and 56s, stretched almost as far as the
eye,
along a gravel path
to end at a body shop open all night
owned by him.

But a graveyard nonetheless,
no less dismembered and partial,
but with a dirt road and bamboo huts
inside of which bodies were only
torn to pieces, while
I
his protégé, son-figure, dreamed of his return as hero,
John Wayne, in one frame,
not the nightmare that he walked everyday
6 x 4 in his gunner's position,
the roar of his chopper drowning out his 17-year-old screams
as his body was cut to pieces
twice
sent home for repairs
and returned from the body shop
not quite as good as new.

to say that I ran down that gravel road
on the day of his return
to find not my boyhood father
but a man
who could only sleep in the day
with the lights on,
the night, reserved no longer for me
but suspicions and screams
even between morphine

I was a small Asian who might lunge
any minute.

to say in the end
the death was kinder than the afterlife.

For Phyllis Wheatley
by Rukiyah

i am not the frail, demure
pale personification
of intrigue
your plastic platform needs me to be
you want me to
fold myself into quarters
inside

i am not an amazon
or a warrior princess
or some catalog creature
who will smile at you
while you jack off over me
(these cheeks
and my smile
are mine alone
and i don't appreciate
being asked where it is)

i am not the sweetly serene
mix of virgin and whore
which excites you
or the black backdrop for
your political agenda
or Hegel's dark proof
for you argument
or the faceless tits and ass
bouncing across your screen
silicone-free and slouching

i will stop twisting your historic balls
when you stop stabbing my ancient womb
i am not a dreamy moon love
angel goddess
or even a star countess
and i never had the delicate grace
of incompetence
or slender beauty and weak wrists
perched atop high heels
i am not clotel or condoleezza
or a customized cunt
awaiting your command

my plump pieces don't fit your flat puzzle

i am a chemically volatile
imbalance of all that remains--

i am a pistol aimed at your hammer
in a skirt
leaving safety to those
more decoration than
fire
making me unworthy
of your counterfeit cotillion
and all the attention
"women" get

A Melancholy Plant
by Rukiyah

the plant
inside my heart
is dying
from overwatering--
the weepy stems floating in mud--
from tears
from semen
from rain
from everything but
what it needs
i didn't really know how to care for it
my romance thumb has never been green
so, i sent it to you, but
slippery when wet pathways
rush into me from the wrong end
now, i refuse to travel alongside you
while dusty grey memories
float lazily overhead--
this is not
that type of scene either--
this is kisses that go down
like cherry cough syrup
initially sweet, but
the aftertaste of truth always comes
and my brown unrequited plant sings
in that minor third
and beats in one-four-five time
and it was never my intention
to make you see
what you had always refused to
but i will admit to the crime
if it will make you honest
because this entire dance
is an untruth of false feet
more like practicing
sexual treachery
this is the way
you teach a dog
a self-depreciating trick
like to rollover for your pleasure
which is why
sleeping with you is making myself sick
and instead of morning-after blues

i feel more like
pick-pocketed and assaulted
i would have rather
you had broken my nose
instead of my heart
but this poem has to be
an ice-pack for my soul
because our games of
break-up-to-make-up-the-
ring-around-the-one-night-stand
are beating me softly about the head
like the white rice of malicious celebration
i am drunk
on pathetic puppy-love wine
sipped in shame,
with no water of redemption from you
my plant is dying

On Sunday
by Rukiyah

On Sunday i
brought a camera
so i could take your picture
put up just enough green
got you some cigarettes
planned to enjoy my day with you
never knowing
the things i got you
would be all i'd have
of you

Response to a National Study
by Rukiyah

if i told you
about women
being raped and beaten
then thousand times
everyday
you'd probably think
i meant some distant third world reservoir
that needed American liberation
where no one
would be convicted
but the most commanding parts
of becoming a treasured amerikan woman
are no different than
circumcision--
it's all about slicing off
that which does not fit
the role defined for us

And the study said, "raped and beaten ten thousand times everyday"

while our deflated hearts and stolen sensibilities
are struck over and over
with shapes, sizes
tones, images ejaculated
by the media of man's world
propped up by a phallic cross
we are held down
spirits spread
and innocence
penetrated and passed around
until we have reached
the worldliness of
womanhood gained

And the study said, "raped and beaten ten thousand times everyday"

if i told you
that horrendous crimes
like breaking and entering
of a young mind and body
outweigh the loss
we acknowledge as the beginning
would anybody attempt

to rehabilitate the criminals
that make sweet sixteen
a debut in regret
alongside the rest\or is it just the way things
have always been here
in this free land?

though we have no bruises
(and some of us do)
we are victimized by the very objects
we have become
raped and beaten
and forced to swallow
every drop

Grendel's African Nightmare
by Rukiyah

fangs
dripping blood and
water of the atlantic
lurk in dark corners
from all directions
where the beast waits
to murder children
with the howls like
satellite signals
to paralyze the spine
and gorge the mind
of the prime citizens
hypnotizing the rest
into non-consciousness
the grey fur
on the sea
the pirate of
humanity
preys on precious cargo
and can hide under the guise
of the hunted
affirming his place
in the food chain

negro can you kill
a wolf?

Silent Truth

by Michael Norris

Dark ages
Dark places
My moons illuminate light to dark spaces
My star gazes
This Farscape-like universe is my fate
I lie awake and dream, eyes open
That I could be seen
I am memory's remembrance
I am spirit's salvation
I am the breath inside creation

But there's nothing left to say
Because your world is covered in a barren darkness
Your sun is man-made

In the company of aliens
I try to fill in the gap of human understanding

I am just the witness that we are not here
If truth be known
Your little world would disappear

So sleep in your axis
I wield only destiny
What is left is all we are
And all I am is what is left in me
After picking away at body

I love with what I cannot see

But you cannot see my love
Your world is still too dark for me

Losing My Religion

by Michael Norris

Everything races toward beauty
Mirrors reflect etheric images
Mind capsules
Sweaty knuckles
It's all coming apart
Breathtaking chaos
The inside out
Liars jackknife
Rustic Evil hands lose balance
Death meets His greatest challenge: Eternity
The crowd regurgitates revolution
But the fear of change kept us here in chains
But nothing's changed
Only cracked illusion revealed
I gather stolen sacrosanct stones for the long way home
Give me a new God
I wanna live in sacred solitude
Search scripture from Allah to Zoroaster
I found a new Satan!
Give the people what they think they need
And hide the wisdom of the universe in the crevices
Snake skin bibles rival at religious irony
Lucifer was the light-bringer
And I bring light to any given subject on
Which most cats won't even touch upon
So breathe me into your iron lungs
Let your tongue salivate
and spit the potency in holy water
Cuz times are changin'
The people are changin' with the times
It's time the people felt the serenity of
the unchanging truth
We are who we are
But who are you?
A mere backlash
A past-based memory crate, losin' its precious cargo
The Present is a Translucent Man and the Future an Invisible Maze
I knew I studied in the dry walls of Atlantis for a
reason years back
Black magick and voodoo princesses
progressive sciences
I guess I'm just a student with no set curriculum
Molested Maggots in my brain

Religious Rocks in my mouth
A pale blindfold coverin' my unseeing eyes
And a sinner on a slippery slidin' scale
Maintain focus on the "messiah inside the metaphysical me"
My worst enemy if I want to keep this world in tact
Your flawed secular science keeps sayin' that the world is flat
...And they keep sayin' that the world is flat
And I won't listen
My mathematical ears break your rubic's equation
But I'm too white to be a 5 percenter
Too smart to be a Christian
Too suspicious to be a Mason
Too loving to be a Luciferan
A pondering Gnostic
that would love to ring the school bell on all religion
See, I'm not a consumer of
the Final Fiery Furnace or the Ronald Regan in the Sky Fable
And couldn't drive the roadmap of Buddhism
if my car wanted to
I imagine John Lennon's psychedelic millennium
Free of all this
But it looks a little too much like New World Order
And they keep sayin' that the world is flat
And keepin' us away from the edges
9 planets?
Quiet and sit back in your seat
The show's not over yet
Or is it?
I eat swine and damage my liver with liquor
Lay down in my bed with a distinguished daughter of Cain!
Another myth I choose to redefine
My home (my dome is my home)
Your mind is not my own!
I'm losing my religion -- Losing my religion
Losing my faith in a system
Cataclysm
The seams of your fantasy are unravelin' --
And it's breathtaking (takin' the breath from your lies)
Where were you when we stood on two?
What's the future like
when we can't catch up to the present?
Questions of a modern mind bender

Peace - I'm out!

Narrative

Auction and Seventh
by Zandria Robinson

Struggle as I might to focus on one of the dozen other sounds on Auction Street—couples chattering, babies babbling in secret languages only mamas could understand, the wind darting from ear to ear gossiping about the day’s events—I could only hear the continuous rasping of the unraveling rope. I listened as it unraveled strand by strand, ever carefully, threatening to drop its strangely heavy cargo onto the auction block. The wind playfully pushed the rope with a modest might, gliding straight off of the Mississippi. I wondered if the people on the Riverboat *Queen* could hear the rope, each strand unraveling and entwining itself around my heart, the unbearable pain of constricted life.

Everyone was milling carelessly about, awaiting the start of the minstrel show on Beale Street. It would begin soon, and the sheer thought compelled my already uneasy insides to contemplate combustion. There would be several coons—some dancing silly jiggaboo jigs to the beat of a completely out-of-tune piano with 47 keys. The old darky once told me that he had no need for the rest of the keys. “Those otha 23?” he had said. “I don’t need em! I’s so good a piano playa, I can plays jus bout any tune wid out em.” I started to suggest one for sport, but restrained myself.

Yips to awaken the sleeping earth went up from the South on Beale, and I knew the minstrel show had commenced. I could see the usual players—the jig-dancing spooks, ignorantly shuffling their feet, oblivious to the dances their fathers had done in Ethiopia; that old darky, called Uncle Boy by the regularly attending crowd, banging out something not quite music, but nevertheless possessing a rhythmic timbre, on those 47 keys; that nigger banjo player with the nimble fingers plucking out Tennessee Appalachia tunes; and of course, the pickaninnies. They were everywhere—unattended—from atop the randomly broken neon lights of the sign in front of B. B. King’s Blues Club to crawling out of open sewers. The entire display played in my mind like Pop’s old record player skipping, skipping, skipping.

No matter how loud the shouts or how many more people crossed Auction headed towards Beale, the sound of the rope seemed to supersede all others. The noon May sun baked my arms and shoulders a brilliant black, my skin glistening from the sweat and vitamin D as I was overcome by a slimy nausea worming its way through my stomach and intestines, engulfing my insides. The rope danced a Victorian waltz with the wind, attempting to hold the weight of the nigger below it.

People continued to push past me as if I were invisible: silly white girls with dirty-dyed blonde hair licking white ice cream cones, their boyfriends on neon skateboards weaving between and outside of them, Negro people with black faces inhaling fattening funnel cakes, grease topped with cane—the pungent smell of which quickly transformed my mild morning sickness into an unbearable afternoon disease—all headed to the minstrel show. There were others: Black women with afros, picks with fists, dreads, headed east on Auction; Negro girls in pigtails doing the vulgar dances they had learned from older cousins to the radio station in their brains; a wizened white with

crusty whiskers driving one of those carriages drawn by sickly and abused horses meant for couples after promenade; an arrogant Negro man sauntering along reading *The Commercial Appeal*, nodding his head slightly offbeat to the music a few blocks over, a nigger-child easing beside him with a tiny finger in a belt loop of his slacks; little Black boys bouncing basketballs between their knees, dreaming freely of the NBA.

A beautiful Black brotha with a goatee flowed down Auction with his lady, the kinky curls of her afro wrapped in a black scarf, and their baby, colored a rich chocolate. They waved at me, approaching me smiling, the sista asking me about how I got my hair to lock so beautifully, the baby singing a song to himself, the brotha inquiring if I was going to Jubilee. The sista looked toward the auction block and closed her eyes holding her baby close, the brotha staring at the block and grabbing them both in his powerful black arms. They seemed to breathe in the scene for a moment, then returned to reality, seemingly shaken, but relieved. I flashed them an uncontrollable smile, inspired by their strength, giggling at the squirming baby. The sista kissed my jaw. They said their farewells and proceeded towards Beale.

I thought perhaps I, too, should join the celebration.

A Negro the color of barbecued charcoal flexed down Auction in a zoot suit, whistling “Wade in the Water,” pulling one of my locks as he greased by. The wind blew south by southeast, in the direction of my midtown apartment, pushing the rope slowly as it passed, pulling its bow across the low E on the upright bass, creating a sound louder even than the resonance of that nigger’s song—a song the sons and daughters of Africa sang when the time to escape for freedom came. It continued to unravel, a snake shedding used skin.

Could a snake, too, cast off the conscience of the world?

My concentration on the music of the rope was broken when my eyes defied me, heightening the reverie, liting down towards the strange fruit. The coon was hanging from a thick branch of a beautiful poplar tree that had fought to sprout and grow out of the antiquated auction block. His face was a deep, soulful black, his neck cocked awkwardly to the side looking at a world turned 90 degrees different from mine, drowned in dried blood—blood from wounds caused by the noose tightening sharply around his neck when the bright red brick upon which he stood whimpering and pleading for his life was suddenly kicked from beneath him. The noise had been offensive, the brick tumbling off the block and shattering easily, effortlessly, into several pieces of varying sizes, as if it had not just a second earlier been holding the fate of a man. His head was grossly swollen because of the May heat, the river, the noose taut around his neck, the Memphis humidity. Resembling an October pumpkin, a Jack-o-Lantern pumped full of hot and humid air, it piloted his now limp body. The eyes bulged out at me, the right one threatening to jump out like the Jack-in-the-Boxes that had always irritated and frightened me as a child. The eye held me for a long time until I thought I heard a breath come from the thick mass of black contortion that was his lips. I realized that it was my own deafening breath flooding my eardrums. I wished it would stop.

Someone had once kissed those lips.

His broad shoulders were hunched inward, as he had been struggling, trying to raise them in a sustained attempt to keep the rope from asphyxiating him. Hidden beneath his Tommy Hilfiger Jeans, his runner's legs rested peacefully. He had worn the matching hat. Bare feet and toes—the second toe slightly longer than the big one—were pointed in an accusatory manner towards hell. His hands were bound Memphis-Police-Department-style behind him, uneasy on the small of his back. I supposed they were a strong, beautifully full black like his face, scarred with the work of a slave. Perhaps he had worked the night shift somewhere; such facts I could and would not know. I was merely resigned to stare from my position, diagonal from the auction block, at the ashen Black corpse swinging from that exquisite tree.

I wondered how much those jeans had cost him at the local department store. The Cotton Maker's Jubilee was once the highlight of the year for me—the end of the school year and a wondrous celebration, just for Black people, all over the streets of downtown Memphis. Beale street was the attraction's center, complete with rides and games, Black clowns smiling and not scary, people laughing and singing, me in the top seat of the Ferris wheel, rocking and kicking and laughing while they let the people off below. I ate corndogs and funnel cakes, snow cones covered in every flavor the vendor had, baby blue cotton candy and chocolate ice cream. Riding atop a float in the parade once, I waved at the Black crowd below cheering and throwing popcorn kernels died various hues up at us, which Mama always warned my sister and me not to eat. "You don't know where those have been!" she would snap. I would nod with my mouth full of them and chew them quickly when she turned her head. My sister would always snatch the red ones, as if they tasted differently than the other colors.

I supposed the fun of youth was that a child was unconscious. Consciousness was a difficult state in which to balance happiness and progress. Still, I wanted to experience that unconscious youth once again.

I envisioned the slaves once sold on Auction on Sundays in Memphis, people floating up the river on the riverboat to buy their wares—cotton, other people, rice from Arkansas. Now, almost a century removed from the Red Summer of 1919—the systematic slaughter of hundreds of the children of Africa, spawns of America, my people, from Tennessee farms to the Harlem ghettos—it seemed a nigger hung bug-eyed and black on the same spot where his mother was once sold from his father.

The wind rose again. The rope sang in its bullfrog baritone. Another sliver unraveled, swishing the air as it turned 360 degrees around its base. The Cotton Makers' Jubilee had commenced, commemorating the beginning of cotton planting season. There were screeches from the Ferris wheel. Though they reminded me of myself in times past, hollering senselessly in the top seat, they still were not enough to drown out the rope. Another crowd brushed past me, interrupting the reverie, excitedly scurrying towards Beale, with a nigger carrying a boom box on his right shoulder, blasting some song about

money and whores, as its leader. Women with relaxers and Gucci purses strutted behind him, shaking and dancing to the spade music, obviously apathetic about their own degradation. The beat was unarguably intoxicating, a product of the West African rhythms still coursing through the blood of Black folk. I wanted to call out to them, but my voice denied me the right. I wanted to speak to him. I tried to call out to them. Everyone was celebrating Jubilee.

I was alone.

A Negro from First Greater Baptist Jesus Holiness Latter Saints Full Methodist Episcopal Gospel Church—I believe that was what the shirt had said—approached me, standing to my right, thankfully compelling the momentary shift of my fixated gaze. Still, I struggled to turn my head, heavy with what seemed the weight of the world, towards him.

His face was painted white.

“Praise Jesus, lil sista! Goin to Jubilee?”

“No sir,” I replied, attempting the sound of desperation, but decidedly failing.

“Christ *Jesus* make it right. I’s e a coon in Jubilee, see?” he exclaimed excitedly pointing to his ridiculous attire, which I attempted not to notice lest it remove my concentration from whatever it was that he was saying. In addition to the absolute absurdity of his golden church shirt covered in all of those hot blue words, his pants, if they could be called such, were ill-placed rags with clippings from Sunday’s comics as patches—*The Boondocks* on his left knee. I quietly laughed. “I gets to ride on *top* of a float. You know what it’s called?”

My insides, preparing to erupt from the nausea, screamed for him to leave as simply and quickly as he had come, lest he become grossly and intimately privy to my afternoon disease, but he persisted. He smiled broadly, his yellow teeth rivaled only by the sun, popped eyes nearly kissing mine as had that Black man’s hanging from that tree atop the auction block. He continued to speak.

“You know what it’s called? Say, what’s that juju bead mean in yo head?” he inquired, pointing a funny and aged finger at the cowry shell on one of my locks. I tried to think of jazz as now I had the arduous task of ignoring the tediously slow unraveling of the rope, the sickness arising within me, as well as the incessant speech and outrageous shirt-and-pants ensemble of this Negro with the painted mouth.

“Do you see—”

“Yes!” I proclaimed, relieved and exhausted. I was sane once more, and my nausea had miraculously subsided.

“Really? You see the otha chuch membas hidin behind that poplar tree ova dere? I thought they was hid good. Theys posed to jump out and skeer me on the float. See? I’s e a coon, and they ghosts tryin to *skeer* me.”

I forced myself to glance behind the tree—the one from which the man hung bitter and lifeless—to see the rest of the ill-hid churchgoers. They were dressed even more ridiculously than he was—as Klansmen—their golden church shirts shining through the white sheets. “I’s e got to tell em dey ain’t hid too well cuz you can see em. We’ll try agin. Maybe we’ll get it the nex time. Say, is you gone come see us? On the float, I mean? You cain’t very well stand heah all day looking at that nigga! You’s e young! Thangs happen, den dey’s ova ‘n done. You youngins cain’t try ‘n save the world *ebry* day. Have fun, lil sista! It’s Jubilee! One mo thang: I loves you and *Jesus* does *too!* *Praisehisholynome!* See ya, lil sista!”

He and the congregation trotted off singing some hymn, saying their amens and hallelujahs, continuing on to the celebration. I smiled at the venerable spectacle of elders, and maybe I would see him on top of that float.

Up walked somebody’s little Black daughter, beautiful and free with tiny cornrows, beads secured by aluminum foil. Spotting me, she ran closer, eventually hugging me, clinging to my hips, saying nothing, but her presence consuming me. I pressed my cheek gently and silently to her braided head, wondering if she had become lost in the crowds and chaos of Jubilee. She finally released me, looking at me with her eyes the soul of the moon, turning back the way she had come, back east on Auction. I glanced up the street behind her as she disappeared towards home.

I wished Brotha Soul were here.

I would be done with agonizing. I would experience fun. I would once again revel in Jubilee. Nudged by the wind, I edged towards the poplar tree, hoping to have the strength to simply close his eyes, to salvage his dignity and my sanity, and then I would enjoy Jubilee. The wind darted dancingly about me, whispering encouraging words, inspiring me. I could hear rumbling in the distance, another crowd approaching, but I was determined to close those bulging eyes. To the auction block, to the beautiful poplar tree, to the beautifully bitter nigger I proceeded. The crowd was upon me, but I needed to close his eyes. I had to close his eyes.

They nearly trampled me, a colorful crowd, wildly ferocious, possessed, in the spirit of the carnival and Jubilee. Their shouts were those of rabid animals infected with the rage of all centuries past and the millennia to come. I tumbled from the block as had the red brick, out of the range of the kerosene being freely doused over the coon’s body. With the pungent odor, the shouts grew, my nausea returned, the crowd huddled. There was a tiny light. Then a bright flame. The Black man’s body blazed a brilliant electric blue, a metallic red next, finally settling on a nauseating burnt orange. I could still see those eyes until they oozed from their sockets, melting and mixing with the lapping voodoo flame. The quick smell of burning flesh raped the air. The breath that I had been

holding escaped suddenly. I turned from the scene and proceeded back east on Auction, forgetting the celebration of Blackness for which I had longed. The shouts of the crowd leapt to heaven, as did the flame, praising Jesus for Jubilee.

My phone rang. It was Brotha Soul.

“What are you doing?” came his hushed alto sax on the other end. I should have been soothed. I could not reply. The coons continued to commemorate the planting of cotton, seeds penetrating fertile soil. I wondered how I would tell him about our seed that had been growing now for three months in red soil. I fingered my ankh necklace. “Come home,” he said.

The celebration continued blocks South. The May sky turned purple. The moon chased the sun to the horizon, drowning it in the Mississippi. Neon lights shot up to rival the stars. The Ferris wheel turned a steady 360 degrees. Glancing towards Beale, I reminisced over the days that I traveled every one of those degrees, filled with a spirit of celebration rivaled not even by birthdays and Kwanzaas. I prayed for those same days for the unborn.

The rope no longer sang.

“Act One” from *The Lost Navigators*
by Carlton Turner

Scene One

Narrator: Supreme balance rules the universe and dictates the manner in which our existence is determined. The illusion of time mesmerizes the impatient eyes seeking that which is required to be. Only those who transcend the boundaries of space and time can comprehend the magnitude and meaning of existence.

In a place where the chosen are all, the few must battle to maintain existence of the many; those few are the Lost Navigators.

Bound to the bowels of Tiamat to serve the sentences of immortality, the Navigators yearn to see the familiar skies that mark the beginning and the ending. The presence of the Milky Way signals that they are closer to home than they have been since before the great flood. Only Now can the truth be told, only Now can the wheat be separated from the tarry, only Now can the halves become whole... The Beginning...

Deep in the lower levels of the subterranean metropolis beneath Capitol City, the hum of super computers dull the normal sounds of pain and distress that usually renders the surroundings unbearable for an agreeable. But on this night fear and anxiety are guests to unfamiliar host, one whose lifeline is lengthened by the amount of host he introduces to his guest.

Haylal: You have no idea what this means! Your meager existence is only a fraction of what it truly means to live.

Kanan: But master, how can it be that you have to give in to any? For are you not the ruler of all the kingdoms of the Inner Sanctum? Why must you now retreat to Shamballah after all you have created here on the surface...Are you not GOD?

Haylal: Fool...you know nothing of GOD, nor the laws that govern the planes!!!

Kanan: But did you not create the laws...are not all laws made to be broken?

Narrator: Haylal pauses as if he were frozen in time on the brink of the most spell binding thought throughout the course of history, then, with the whisper of a gentle wind he utters...

Haylal: Leave me.

Scene Two

Narrator: 6000 years have passed since Catastrophe has seen Apsu, the outer sun, and the thought of the rising of the first sun of the Golden Age brings back memories of a time long forgotten by the surface dwellers. A time when the New Beings were evolving to the specifications set and guided by those sent to Tiamat from above. As she races to the surface, she thinks of the current state of the surface world and how she could do nothing to release the pressure of the constant turmoil and chaos spread by the Disagreeable. Returning to the surface for the first time to receive the divine light and guidance necessary to fulfill her duties as one of the Navigators of the Inner Sanctum, Catastrophe thinks of her comrades and what may be in store during the Solar Cypher.

Meanwhile, in a remote forest area of the Atlans sits Acquired Misinformation of Organized Masses, a private school for underprivileged students of all ages and backgrounds. Students, hand selected by the governing board of the institution, compile information of all types, categorize it, provide links to similar information, and research all areas of life, to stockpile the most vast database of information in the inner sanctum. Information dating back to pre-civilization of Tiamat, even as far back to initial creation.

The overseer of the institution is Chancellor Jonathon Moriz Alexander. Dedicated to the education of all generations on the one truth, endowed only with facts, his mission is to contrast lies and give site to those blinded by the light of confusion. Code name Gibraltar, he also is the head of the Navigators. Present at Secondary creation, Gibraltar has earned intergalactical merit for his ongoing work in the Inner Sanctum.

This day marks a special time for Gibraltar as well as all of the Navigators, for tonight they will again be reunited. To maintain balance, all but Gibraltar were forced to retreat underground, or to be suspended in stasis capsules independent of time or space for the length of the Lunar Cypher. But tonight all will resurface and the stars will unlock the capsules returning life to the dead and balance to the Inner Sanctum.

Scene Three

Back in Capitol City...(Telepathic message sent to Son of Sam)

Haylal: Contact the Starship Catalak, make sure everything is Going as scheduled.

Narrator: Biologically fused with Tiamat's largest surface computer, S.O.S., Son of Sam, Hal begins to fulfill the request of Sam. With the energy manifested by mere thought waves, Hal begins to move Tiamat's orbital satellites,

relaying messages across galaxies to locate the Catalak.

Catalyst: Incoming message from Tiamat.

Lord Tygris: Display.

Hal: I take it everything is proceeding as planned.

Narrator: Hal secretly scans the on-board computer and retrieves the information requested by Haylal.

Lord T: We will be arriving in Mitsryiam in approximately six hours.

Hal: With the requested information I presume?

Lord T: Why else would I return to your filthy vile planet? It is a pity what your kind has done to Qi.... It would be a dangerous for us to come all this way and not be accommodated for our services.

Hal: You shall receive all that you desire.

Lord T: Once I arrive I deal only with Haylal.

Hal: Haylal deals with no one!

Lord T: I deal directly with Haylal or I return to the Leo Star Cluster with the data you so desperately need to survive...and I assure you there is no one within 73 light years willing to share this information with you. I do not bargain with snakes! All my demands will be met before the transaction takes place.

Hal: Very well. You will receive final transmission upon entering The Inner Sanctum.

Ship's computer: END TRANSMISSION.

Lord T: Computer, trace transmission.

Computer: SIGNAL SOURCE LOCATED.

Leader: Catalyst, set a course to those coordinates and take the Lynx to find Hal. Report back to me as soon as you make contact. I want to know that which he fails to tell me. Labba Labba, accompany her, and don't engage in combat without my permission! Is that understood?

Labba Labba: Yes my lord.

Scene Four

Narrator: Deep in the catacombs of Mammoth Cave sits a stasis capsule containing a being that transcends the boundaries of time by way of technology passed down by the founders of Tiamat's first culture. Within the boundaries of this containment field lays the Navigator In charge of security, General 9.

Gibraltar: Easy old friend. It's that time again. I hope 6,000 years of slumber is enough rest for the long journey that we are about to embark on.

General 9: Is this our new home?

Ghil: No. We are between Argartha and the surface of Qi. I had to conceal you here under the protection of some friends during the Lunar cypher. In a moment we will teleport you to the headquarters.

Gen 9: How do we stand on protection?

Ghil: How did I know that you were going to ask that? Well, security is fine, but nevertheless your expertise is needed. I also have a couple of surprises in store for you.

Narrator: Instantaneously both Gibraltar and General 9 teleport back to Navigator Headquarters. Once back at the base a small panel opens leading to a sub-terranean laboratory. Therein lies two capsules isolated in an anti-gravity vacuum, equipped with a stellar time lock set to open at the command of the heavens.

Gen 9: What exactly are these?

Ghil: Be patient. You will have to wait. They will open precisely at midnight but now I must meet Catastrophe and Adafa at the base of the Great Pyramids.

Gen 9: Well...what shall I do when the capsules open?

Ghil: I will explain it all when I get back.

Narrator: Using the ancient exercise of the masters, Gibraltar increases his energy and vibrates on a density that allows him to transcend Space and time, teleporting to meet the other Navigators returning From Kurnugi.

Adafa: Brother is near...I can sense his spirit. This way.

Narrator: Adafa spots Gibraltar at the end of the cavern.

- Ghil: So good to see you brother. Thank you for guiding Catastrophe back to the surface.... Are you ready?
- Adafa: Yes. It is now time for me to elevate to the next phase. The journey has been taxing, but if there were no challenge there would be no reward.
- Catastrophe: We only have a few minutes left before this cypher is complete. We must hurry and take our places.
- Ghil: I have to leave as soon as the light is received, so you two come back to the lab as soon as you can, use Gold Ray. You should be able to find it without a problem. Be careful, I don't expect this to be a quiet night.

Scene Five

- Narrator: Catalyst and Labba Labba head for Hal's headquarters. The Catalak has now entered Tiamat's atmosphere and still has received no add additional information from Hal.
- Catalyst: The source of the signal was traced to these coordinates. Computer, scan the proximity!
- Narrator: The on-board computer scans the vicinity and gives a visual layout of the perimeter defenses.
- Labba Labba: This is a virtual fortress. This technology is familiar; seems to be from the Pleiades star system. How did Haylal ever get this type of...
- Computer: PERIMETER DEFENSE PROBES HAVE LOCKED ON TO OUR VESSEL.
- Catalyst: Computer, engage force field and lasers. Labba Labba, return fire on my command.
- Labba Labba: But Lord Tygris said not to engage in battle without his authorization.
- Catalyst: Return fire on my command!!
- Labba Labba: Computer, activate VS level 2.
- Computer: VIBRASONIC REGULATOR ACTIVATED.
- Catalyst: Fire... I said FIRE!!
- Labba Labba: I am firing, but it has no effect on the structure. We have taken a direct hit.

Computer, increase power to level 6.

Computer: MUST EXHAUST ENERGY SUPPLY TO COMPLY WITH
COMMAND.

Labba Labba: Computer, abort command and maintain force field...

Catalyst: Computer complete command and fire!!

Labba Labba: But without our shield there is no way that we can maneuver return fire
from the defensive systems.

Catalyst: Abort command, restore power to shield and prepare for tactical
Maneuvers to a safer location. Immediately!!!

Narrator: Meanwhile, at the site of the meeting between Haylal and Lord Tygris
prepares to land the Catalak.

Lord Tygris: Prepare to land. Mecca, you two come with me. You monitor all
locations from the ship. What is the present status of the Lynx?

Attendant: We have lost all contact with the Lynx.

Lord T: Is the tracking device still intact?

Attendant: Yes.

Lord T: Dispatch a crew to locate the Lynx. We must retrieve that Ship.

Attendant: What about Catalyst and Labba Labba?

Lord T: Locate the ship and then worry about them! Everyone must be extra
cautious. We cannot afford to underestimate Haylal! His record of betrayal
speaks for itself.

Scene Six

Narrator: Outside the Great Pyramids, the small klan of mystics gather to usher in
the new cypher.

Mystics: Now the divine light from the belt of Orion shall illuminate the Inner
Sanctum, awakening slumbering souls to carry out the will of the most
High.

Narrator: At exactly midnight the light of the Orion constellation shines through the
portals of the pyramids erected 10,000 years prior to this date. The Light

breaks up to be spread to the five corners of the great structure, imparting the knowledge and instructions needed to carry out the job of The Children of the Sun.

Contributors

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