Chronology and notes by Virginia C. Fowler

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The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni

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The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni

Introduction

Giovanni writes in an essay, "nor to sociology nor science nor economics to tell the story of our people." Instead, she continues, that story must be told by writers. To read through this volume of Giovanni's poetry is indeed to read "the story" of the last thirty years of American life, as that life has been lived, observed, and reflected about by a racially conscious Black woman. The "Black is beautiful" slogan of the 1960s is given joyous and vivid embodiment in a poem like "Beautiful Black Men," for example, which celebrates the arrogant new strut of Black men "walking down the street." At the same time, we are reminded by a work like "Woman Poem" that the new racial pride was not always as liberating for Black women as it was for Black men because "it's a sex object if you're pretty/and no love/ or love and no sex if you're fat/get back fat black woman be a mother/grandmother strong thing but not woman."

The rage felt by so many Black Americans at America's persistent and destructive racism is registered in poems like the fine "Great Pax Whitie," which includes allusions to the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Malcolm X. The topicality of many of Giovanni's poems grounds them in the historical moment in which they were written, even as the emotional and intellectual responses to specific events transcend the particular and become universal. Although such topicality is frequently disparaged by literary critics, it is central to Giovanni's conception of poetry and the poet. "Poetry," she has written, "is but a reflection of the moment. The universal comes from the particular" (Sacred Cows, p. 57). Further, she has stated that "I have even gone so far as to think one of the duties of this profession is to be topical, to try to say something about the times in which we are living and how we both view and evaluate them"

¹Sacred Cows . . . and Other Edibles (New York: William Morrow, 1988), p. 61; hereafter cited in text.

(Sacred Cows pp. 32–33). This conception of the poet and poetry is consistent with the aesthetic theories of the Black Arts Movement, from which Giovanni was one of the most popular and controversial young writers to emerge; these writers sought to create, in the words of Amiri Baraka, "an art that would actually reflect black life and its history and legacy of resistance and struggle!"²

Giovanni herself connects the importance of topicality in poetry to the tradition of the African *griot*; like the *griots*, she writes, Black American poets "have traveled the length and breadth of the planet singing our song of the news of the day, trying to bring people closer to the truth" (*Sacred Cows*, pp. 33–34). Her poems thus often speak directly about specific events or people, giving expression to the emotions they provoke and disclosing the realities and truths that underlie them—as she sees them. Giovanni does not believe, however, that the poet is a "god," or that the poet has visionary powers beyond those of people who are not poets or writers. She also denies the power of poetry to change the world; as she has stated, "I don't think that writers ever changed the mind of anybody. I think we always preach to the saved." What, then, is poetry? And why does she write it?

The answers to those questions are inextricably tied to Giovanni's consciousness of her identity as a Black American and to her recognition of the struggle of Black Americans to find a voice that would express themselves and their realities: "The African slave bereft of his gods, his language, his drums searched his heart for a new voice. Under sun and lash the African sought meaning in life on earth and the possibility of life hereafter. They shuffled their feet, clapped their hands, gathered a collective audible breath to release the rhythms of the heart. We affirmed in those dark days of chattel through the White Knights of Emancipation

²Amiri Baraka, "Foreword: The Wailer," in *Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings by Larry Neal*, ed. Michael Schwartz (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1989), p. x.

³Arlene Elder, "A MELUS Interview: Nikki Giovanni," *MELUS* 9 (Winter 1982): 61–75; reprinted in *Conversations with Nikki Giovanni*, ed. Virginia C. Fowler (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), p. 126.

that all we had was a human voice to guide us and a human voice to answer the call" (Sacred Cows, p. 52.) Giovanni's poetry (as well as her prose) represents her own efforts to give voice to her vision of truth and reality as honestly as she can because, she has said, "the only thing you bring . . . is your honesty." The "truth" her poetry speaks, then, is always the truth as she honestly sees it, and this honesty of expression is what, for her, determines that her poetry is, in fact, art: "I like to think that if truth has any bearing on art, my poetry and prose is art because it's truthful." (Sacred Cows, p. 66). Articulating through poetry her vision of reality is the equivalent of the slaves' recognition that their survival depended on their finding "a human voice to guide us and a human voice to answer the call." The loneliness inherent in the human condition is, Giovanni has said, assuaged by art, for "we are less lonely when we connect," and "Art is a connection. I like being a link. I hope the chain will hold" (Sacred Cows, p. 58).

The development of a unique and distinctive *voice* has been perhaps the single most important achievement of Giovanni's career. Although even the most superficial perusal of this volume will reveal many changes in tone, in ideas, and in subjects throughout Giovanni's writing career, what remains consistent even while we watch it grow in maturity and confidence—is the voice speaking to us from the page. Many readers of Giovanni's poetry actually come to her written work after having heard her read from it. And in part because Giovanni has literally taken her poetry "to the people" through hundreds of public lectures and readings over the last thirty-five years, her spoken voice is immediately recognizable by countless people. Seeking to simulate spoken language, the poetry itself possesses distinctive oral qualities. Because it is always intended to be read aloud, its full impact can frequently be felt only through hearing it. In her poetry Giovanni attempts to continue African and African-American oral traditions, and she seems in many ways to have less reverence for the written word than for the spoken.

⁴Ibid., p. 128.

Often, for example, Giovanni's poetry draws our attention to the limitations and artificiality of language and of language shaped into what we call "art." In "My House," for example, the speaker repeatedly asks us "does this really sound/like a silly poem?" until she finally and explicitly asserts that "english isn't a good language/to express emotion through/mostly i imagine because people/try to speak english instead/of trying to speak through it." Written language, the poem suggests, becomes a barrier to expression and understanding when we treat it as an end in itself rather than as a means to an end. The aesthetic assumption underlying this conception of language is obviously far removed from notions of "art for art's sake." Unless it is connected to the realities of life, art, for Giovanni, lacks both meaning and value.

One of Giovanni's most explicit, though lighthearted, treatments of the subject of language and poetry is found, appropriately, in "A Poem for Langston Hughes." This playful love poem represents one of the few instances in her poetry in which Giovanni consciously attempts to employ the style of another writer. The poem's rhythms, rhyme, and images collectively evoke the essence of Langston Hughes, whose poetry and career have significantly influenced Giovanni's own. Drawing almost nonsensically on many of the formal elements of poetry, the speaker of the poem states:

metaphor has its point of view allusions and illusion . . . too

meter . . . verse . . . classical . . . free poems are what you do to me

Poetry, Giovanni here suggests, cannot be reduced to its component parts or rhetorical devices, for poetry is not removed from life but expressive and experiential.

Giovanni's desire, as she states it metaphorically at the end of "Cotton Candy On A Rainy Day," is "To put a three-dimensional picture/On a one-dimensional surface." As a poet who equates the survival of her people with their ability to use the only thing left

them, their "human voice," Giovanni must rely on language to create written poems with the immediacy and impact of the spoken word, poems that, like such Black musical forms as the spirituals, the blues, and jazz, communicate directly to a reader/listener. Thus, she has said that she does not polish or revise the individual words or lines of a poem, but instead will rework the entire poem, for "a poem is a way of capturing a moment. . . . A poem's got to be a single stroke, and I make it the best I can because it's going to live. I feel if only one thing of mine is to survive, it's at least got to be an accurate picture of what I saw. I want my camera and film to record what my eye and my heart saw." The poem is, in many ways, a kind of gestalt.

Giovanni frequently writes as though she wishes to distinguish her own poems from the artifice we might normally associate with poetry. Because she sees poetry as "the culture of a people," she seems to believe that it has an urgency and significance we are not accustomed to expecting from it. A recent poem in praise of Black women provides a good example of Giovanni's strategy of insisting that we see the "single stroke" of meaning. Her strategy in "Stardate Number 18628.190," a poem written for the twenty-fifth anniversary issue of Essence magazine, is to repeat, in three of the poem's five stanzas, that what we are reading is not art, but something else. The poem opens and closes, in fact, with the assertion that "This is not a poem." What, then, is it? The entire piece endeavors to identify and represent itself as the Black women whom it in fact celebrates. It accumulates images evocative of the many everyday activities, extraordinary accomplishments, and modes of being of Black women, "the Daughters of the Diaspora." These Daughters have given not a "poem" but "a summer quilt," a metaphor used by Giovanni elsewhere, as well as by numerous contemporary women writers. In "Stardate," Giovanni employs the

⁵Claudia Tate, Black Women Writers At Work (New York: Continuum, 1983); reprinted in Fowler, Conversations with Nikki Giovanni, p. 146.

⁶Nikki Giovanni, Gemini: An Extended Autobiographical Statement on My First Twenty-Five Years of Being a Black Poet (1971; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1985), p. 95.

quilt as a metaphor of family history and family love; the pieces of the quilt are scraps of cloth, each of which reminds the speaker of an event and a person in her family's history, including "grandmother's wedding dress," "grandpappa's favorite Sunday tie," "the baby who died," and Mommy's pneumonia. An appropriate symbol of the transformative powers by which Black Americans have resisted the oppression enacted upon them, the guilt represents the Black woman's creation of beauty out of discarded, worthless bits of material. Even more, however, the history evoked by the guilt and the love and human connection found in that history are what distinguish the quilt from "art": "This does not hang from museum walls . . , nor will it sell for thousands . . . This is here to keep me warm." Unlike the "art" collected in museums, which may have great monetary value but is, the lines imply, cold and sterile, the quilt's value is based on its warming, life-sustaining, and lifenurturing powers.

The opening words of the third stanza offer a variation on the assertion that "This is not a poem." Beginning with the claim that "This is not a sonnet," the third stanza delineates the music created and sung by Black women, from the spirituals to rap. Significantly, the stanza ends with the reiterated denial that it is a sonnet and the counterclaim that it is instead "the truth of the beauty that the only authentic voice of Planet Earth comes from the black soil . . . tilled and mined . . . by the Daughters of the Diaspora." Perhaps because the sonnet is frequently regarded in Western literary tradition as one of the most elegant poetic forms, mastery of which is often expected of aspiring writers, Giovanni seizes on it in order to juxtapose its artifice to the authenticity of the Black woman's voice. What constitute the "authenticity" of that voice, the poem suggests, are the comfort, support, celebration, encouragement, unselfishness, and prayerfulness that it has lifted itself to speak and sing. In other words, authenticity is a function of human conduct, of ethical behavior. The Black woman's voice is authentic because. as the poem concludes, the Black woman has made "the world a hopeful...loving place." Such authenticity of voice is for Giovanni clearly superior to the aesthetic form in which that voice

might cast its words. Further, while the sonnet may be a poetic form prized in Western literary traditions, it is not a form capable of expressing Black realities; the Black woman's "authentic" voice has created its own forms through which to sing and speak.

Giovanni's insistence that aesthetic value emerges from and is dependent upon moral value surfaces not only in this poem from the 1990s, but in the poems throughout this volume. It is a corollary to her equally consistent belief that the poet writes not from experience but from empathy: "You try as a writer to put yourself into the other person's position. Empathy. Empathy is everything because we can't experience everything. Experience is important, but empathy is the key."7 Many of Giovanni's poems, both early and more recent, make obvious use of empathy, including such pieces as "Poem For Aretha," "Poem For A Lady Whose Voice I Like," "Poem For Angela Yvonne Davis," and "Linkage." But for Giovanni, empathy is not simply a tool for poetically appropriating lives and experiences removed from the world inhabited by the poet; on the contrary, empathy is key to human life and understanding because it is key to human connection (one of the primary purposes of art as she sees it). Empathy enables us to collapse the dualistic structures that polarize our world into "us" and "them." Not surprisingly, many of Giovanni's poems attribute a powerful capacity for empathy to Black women, who "wipe away our own grief . . . to give comfort to those beyond comfort" ("Hands: For Mother's Day"). The Black woman's unselfish willingness to empathize with others constitutes one of the sources of her authenticity of voice.

As one reads through the poems in this volume, one cannot avoid recognizing that race and gender are inextricably intertwined constituents of Giovanni's thematic concerns. The significance of individual women in the poet's life is evident from the outset of her career—teachers, friends, her mother, and her grandmother are represented in her poems as crucial to her sense of self and wellbeing. In her mature poems, especially in those from *My House* for-

⁷Virginia C. Fowler, "An Interview with Nikki Giovanni" in Fowler, Conversations with Nikki Giovanni, p. 202.

ward, Giovanni demonstrates increasing awareness of the extent to which gender is a problematic component of identity for women. As she says in "A Poem Off Center," "maybe i shouldn't feel sorry / for myself / but the more i understand women / the more i do." Even Giovanni's early militant poems remark the subordinate role women were expected to play in the "revolution." Other early poems take note of the sexist treatment to which the successful Black woman is apt to be subjected by the Black man. In "Poem For A Lady Whose Voice I Like," for example, the male speaker attributes Lena Horne's success to her physical attractiveness and the attention bestowed on her by white people, rather than to her abilities and talent as a singer; his final exasperated charge is that "you pretty full of yourself ain't chu," to which she replies, "show me someone not full of herself / and i'll show you an empty person."

Countless poems play variations on this theme, reiterating the idea that the position women are expected to occupy—solely because of their gender—leaves them "empty" in one way or another. Expected to "sit and wait / cause i'm a woman" ("All I Gotta Do"), women live in a world.

made up of baby clothes	to be washed
food	to be cooked
lullabies	to be sung
smiles	to be glowed
hair	to be plaited
ribbons	to be bowed
coffee	to be drunk
books	to be read
tears	to be cried
loneliness	to be borne
	"[Untitled]"

Expected to devote their lives to the needs of others, women do not necessarily receive any gratitude for such devotion, but may actually be punished for it. As Giovanni says in "Boxes,"

everybody says how strong i am

only black women and white men are truly free they say

it's not difficult to see how stupid they are

i would not reject my strength though its source is not choice but responsibility

Variations on the idea expressed in the final stanza may be found frequently in Giovanni's poetry.

While many of Giovanni's poems explore and describe women's lives, others celebrate women—Black women in particular—as a way of providing an antidote to the slurs so often cast upon them. None offers a more audacious celebration than the enormously popular "Ego Tripping (there may be a reason why)." Without question one of the most powerful celebrations of the Black woman ever written, the poem attributes to her the creation of all the great civilizations of the world. Far from being bound to a narrow and confined existence, the speaker asserts, in the poem's famous concluding words, that "I . . . can fly / like a bird in the sky. . . ." Although "Ego Tripping" accumulates outrageous claims to power ("the filings from my fingernails are / semiprecious jewels," "The hair from my head thinned and gold was laid / across three continents"), it also accurately reflects Giovanni's frankly chauvinistic belief that whatever good we find in our world is attributable to the Black woman. Characteristically, in this poem and many others (as

well as in her prose), Giovanni urges that we not be ashamed of an aspect of identity over which we have no control—in this case, gender—just because the world in which we live uses it as a basis for oppression. Although she does not deny the reality of the oppression, she rejects the notion that the victim is responsible for her own oppression. Instead, in what is a frequent gesture, she embraces her gender and her race, and, in poems like "Ego Tripping," offers her own definition and description of the Black woman. She once commented, in fact, that "Ego Tripping" was written in opposition to the gender roles typically taught to little girls; it "was really written for little girls. . . . I really got tired of hearing all of the little girls' games, such as Little Sally Walker."8

The speaker in "Poem (For Nina)" similarly emphasizes the importance of embracing her racial identity. If the white world cannot see beyond the color of her skin, and tries to oppress her because of it, then she will embrace in order to celebrate that component of her identity:

if i am imprisoned in my skin let it be a dark world with a deep bass walking a witch doctor to me for spiritual consultation let my world be defined by my skin and the color of my people for we spirit to spirit will embrace this world

The centrality of race and gender in Giovanni's poetry is evident throughout this volume, which brings together all of the poetry she published between 1968 and 1999. Especially in her later poetry, African American history becomes an important focus. A notable example is the powerful "But Since You Finally Asked," which was written to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the slave memorial at Mount Vernon. The initial public reading

⁸Barbara Reynolds, And Still We Rise: Interviews with 50 Black Role Models (Washington: Gannet New Media Services, 1988), p. 94.

of this poem at the Mount Vernon ceremony was accompanied by a deluge of rain, and to the participants gathered on the slope overlooking the Potomac River nature itself seemed to join in mourning the "many thousand gone." Giovanni's poem recounts the history of African people brought to America in chains, who were never "asked . . . what we thought of Jamestown," never told "'Welcome'...'You're Home'." The poem juxtaposes the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution to the realities of life for Black Americans, the only Americans, the poem suggests, who have actually believed in and tried to practice those ideals-which were never intended to include them. Brutally enslaved, denied their humanity, erased from history, Black Americans "didn't write a constitution . . . we live one." Echoing words from the Negro National Anthem ("Lift Every Voice and Sing"), Giovanni concludes the poem with a celebration of the courage, integrity, and generosity of her people.

This poem makes clear why Nikki Giovanni continues to be so well loved: she is the definitive "poet of the people." The significant body of work collected here will allow readers to follow her development as a poet and a thinker. More than anything, this collection dramatizes Giovanni's dynamism, her refusal to continue journeying down familiar poetic paths, her commitment to growth and change. To borrow from her own words in "Stardate," we might well say that this is not just a collection of poems but "a celebration of the road we have traveled . . . [and] a prayer . . . for the roads yet to come!"

-- VIRGINIA C. FOWLER

July 1995



Chronology

1943 Me Born Yolande Cornelia Giovanni, Jr., on June 7 in Knoxville General Hospital, Knoxville, Tennessee, the daughter of Yolande Cornelia (1919—) and Jones "Gus" Giovanni (1914–82), and the sister of Gary Ann (1940—), aged two years, nine months. Knoxville is the home of Giovanni's maternal grandparents, John Brown (1887–1962) and Emma Louvenia Watson (1898–1967). In August the family of four moves to Cincinnati, Ohio, home of her father, where her parents take jobs as houseparents at Glenview School, a home for Black boys. The children and their mother make frequent visits to their grandparents' home in Knoxville throughout their childhood. At some point during Giovanni's first three years, her sister—for reasons no one really understands—begins calling her Nikki.

1947 The family leaves Glenview and moves briefly to Woodlawn, a suburb of Cincinnati. Giovanni's father teaches at South Woodlawn School and works evenings and weekends at the YMCA. Because Woodlawn has no elementary school for Black children, Gary lives with her father's half brother and his wife, Bill and Gladys Atkinson, in Columbus, Ohio, where she attends second grade.

1948 The family moves to a house on Burns Avenue in nearby Wyoming, another suburb of Cincinnati. Giovanni begins kindergarten at Oak Avenue School, where her teacher is Mrs. Elizabeth Hicks; her sister enters third grade there.

1949–52 Giovanni completes the first, second, and third grades at Oak Avenue School, while her sister completes the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades. In 1951 her mother accepts a third-grade teaching position at St. Simon's School, an all-Black Episcopal school in the nearby Black suburb of Lincoln Heights.

Gus Giovanni makes a down payment on a home at 1167 Jackson Street in Lincoln Heights and moves his family there. Giovanni's parents had hoped to build a home in a new all-Black housing development called Hollydale. But after several years they realize that obtaining a loan is not going to be possible in the foreseeable future; racist lending practices simply cannot be circumvented. With the money he makes from selling his stock in this venture, her father is able to make the down payment on the Jackson Street house. During World War II, Lincoln Heights had been known as the Valley Homes, affordable housing for employees of General Electric, but with the economic boom following the war, white residents began moving to other suburbs. The U.S. government sold the homes to a corporation of Black citizens, and Lincoln Heights was born.

Giovanni enters fourth grade at St. Simon's School. Her sister enrolls in seventh grade at South Woodlawn School, where their father teaches.

Giovanni continues her schooling at St. Simon's 1953-57 School, where she completes the fifth through eighth grades. Her seventh-grade teacher, Sister Althea Augustine, is an important influence on her and ultimately becomes a lifelong friend. Her sister enters Wyoming High School as one of the three Black students who desegregate the previously all-white school. In 1955, when Emmett Till is killed, Gary's teacher makes the comment "He got what he deserved." Gary and her friend Beverly Waugh walk out in protest. Eventually the school makes an official apology. Also during this period, Giovanni's father quits his teaching job to take a better-paying position as a probation officer in the Hamilton County Juvenile Detention Office. Through his contacts in that position, he is able to help Giovanni's mother obtain a position with the Hamilton County Welfare Department, which carries better wages than the one hundred dollars a month she has been earning at St. Simon's School.

1957–58 Giovanni enters the ninth grade at Lockland High School, an all-Black school. Her sister's negative experiences in desegregating Wyoming High School make her and her parents uninterested in having her try to attend one of the white high schools. Gary leaves home to attend Central State University. Meanwhile, the tensions between her parents are difficult for Giovanni to handle. So in 1958 she asks her grandmother Watson if she can come to Knoxville for the summer. Once there, she tells her grandparents her real plan: to stay with them and attend school in Knoxville.

1958–60 Giovanni enrolls in Austin High School, where her grandfather taught Latin for many years. Her grandmother, who is involved in numerous charitable and political endeavors, becomes an increasing influence on her, teaching her the importance of helping others and fighting injustice. When a demonstration is planned to protest segregated dining facilities at downtown Rich's department store, her grandmother cheerfully volunteers Nikki. In high school Giovanni has two influential teachers: her French teacher, Mrs. Emma Stokes, and her English teacher, Miss Alfredda Delaney. They persuade her to apply for early admission to college. Meanwhile, Gary has a son, Christopher, in April 1959. That summer Giovanni returns to Cincinnati to take care of Christopher, who is living with her parents.

1960–61 Giovanni goes to Nashville to enroll in Fisk University—her grandfather's alma mater—as an early entrant. Academics present no problem to her, but she is unprepared for the conservatism of this small Black college. Almost from the outset she runs into trouble with the dean of women, Ann Cheatam, whose ideas about the behavior and attitudes appropriate to a Fisk woman are diametrically opposed to Giovanni's ideas about the intellectual seriousness and political awareness appropriate to a college student. She goes back to

Knoxville to spend Thanksgiving with her grandparents—without obtaining permission from Dean Cheatam. To compound the problem, when she visits Dean Cheatam the Monday after Thanksgiving, she articulates her contempt for the rules. Not surprisingly, she is expelled on February 1. She goes back to Cincinnati, where she lives with her parents. Her grandmother, far from uttering any reproach, travels to Nashville to meet with Dean Cheatam and later writes a letter protesting her decision.

1961–63 Giovanni lives with her parents in Cincinnati, takes care of her nephew, and works at Walgreens. She also takes courses at the University of Cincinnati and does volunteer work with children and parents among her mother's clients. Her parents move into a better house at 1168 Congress Avenue, just a few blocks from the house on Jackson. In March 1962, her grandfather Watson dies, and she drives her mother and nephew to Knoxville for the funeral.

1964–66 Giovanni's grandmother Louvenia is obliged to move from her home at 400 Mulvaney Street, which is sacrificed to "urban renewal." Although her new house on Linden Avenue is nice, it lacks the accumulated memories of the old house, which Giovanni has come to regard as home. Giovanni travels to Fisk to explore the possibility of reenrolling. She discovers that Dean Cheatam is gone and that her replacement, Blanche McConnell Cowan ("Jackie") is completely different. Dean Cowan purges the file Dean Cheatam collected on Giovanni and encourages her to come back, which she does in the fall of 1964. Giovanni does well academically and becomes a leader on campus. She majors in history but takes writers' workshops with the writer in residence John Oliver Killens. In spring 1966, at the First Writers Conference at Fisk, she meets Dudley Randall, who will soon launch Broadside Press; Robert Hayden; Melvin Tolson; Margaret Walker; and LeRoi Jones, now Amiri Baraka. She edits a student literary journal (titled $\acute{E}lan$) and reestablishes the campus chapter of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee). She

publishes an essay in *Negro Digest* on gender questions in the movement.

1967 Having completed her undergraduate coursework in December, Giovanni moves back to Cincinnati and rents her own apartment. She receives her B.A. in history, with honors, on January 28. Her grandmother Louvenia Watson dies on March 8, just two days before she was to have come for a visit. Giovanni drives her mother, sister, and nephew to Knoxville for the funeral, marking the most significant loss of her life. She turns to writing as a refuge and produces most of the poems that will make up her first volume, Black Feeling Black Talk. She edits Conversation, a Cincinnati revolutionary art journal. She attends the Detroit Conference of Unity and Art, where she meets H. Rap Brown (1943–), now Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin, and other movement leaders. She organizes a Black Arts Festival, Cincinnati's first, for which she adapts and directs Virginia Hamilton's Zeely for the stage. Moves to Wilmington, Delaware and, with the help of a Ford Foundation fellowship, enrolls in the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Work. Works at a People's Settlement House in Wilmington as a part of her graduate studies.

1968 Giovanni borrows money to publish her first volume of poetry, Black Feeling Black Talk. She drops out of the University of Pennsylvania but continues working at the settlement house. Continues writing poems at a prodigious rate. Goes to Atlanta for the funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr., who was assassinated on April 4. Receives a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Moves to New York City, where she begins almost immediately to attract attention. Enrolls in an M.F.A. program at Columbia University's School of Fine Arts. At the end of the year, uses money from sales of Black Feeling Black Talk and a grant from the Harlem Arts Council to privately publish her second volume of poetry, Black Judgement; Broadside Press offers to distribute it.

Sunday afternoon book party (to promote *Black Judgement*) at the old Birdland jazz club, which attracts hundreds of people and makes the next day's metro section of *The New York Times*. Gains increasing attention from the media and begins receiving invitations to read and speak. In April *The New York Times* features her in an article entitled "Renaissance in Black Poetry Expresses Anger." The *Amsterdam News* names her one of the ten "most admired Black women." Regularly publishes book reviews in *Negro Digest*. Travels to Cincinnati for Labor Day weekend and gives birth to Thomas Watson Giovanni, her only child. Returns to New York and begins teaching at Livingston College of Rutgers University; frequently makes the commute with the struggling writer Toni Cade Bambara (1939–95).

Giovanni edits and privately publishes Night Comes Softly, one of the earliest anthologies of poetry by Black women; it includes poems by new and relatively unknown writers as well as by established poets such as Margaret Walker and Mari Evans. Establishes NikTom, Ltd. Meets Ellis Haizlip (1929–91) and begins making regular appearances on his television program, Soul!, an entertainment-variety-talk show that promoted Black art and culture and allowed political expression. (During the history of the show—1967-72—which aired on WNET, many important artists and leaders, including Muhammad Ali, Jesse Jackson, Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, Gladys Knight, Miriam Makeba, and Stevie Wonder, made appearances. Giovanni was for several years a "regular.") Giovanni publishes Black Feeling Black Talk/Black Judgement as one volume with William Morrow & Co. Publishes Re: Creation with Broadside Press. Writes and publishes the broadside "Poem of Angela Yvonne Davis." Has become a recognized figure on the Black literary scene; in the anthology We Speak as Liberators, published this year, she is referred to as an "established name." Ebony magazine names her Woman of the Year.

Giovanni publishes autobiography, Gemini, and poems for children, Spin A Soft Black Song. Black Feeling Black Talk/Black Judgement comes out in paperback. Records Truth Is On Its Way with the New York Community Choir. Performs with the choir in a concert to introduce the album at Canaan Baptist Church in Harlem before a crowd of 1,500. Continues regular appearances on Soul!, including an appearance in January with Lena Horne. The Mugar Memorial Library of Boston University approaches her about housing her papers and she accepts; today the Mugar has all her papers and memorabilia. Contact magazine names her Best Poet in its annual awards. Mademoiselle magazine names her Woman of the Year. Travels to Africa. Truth sells more than 100,000 copies in its first six months. Giovanni travels to London to tape special segments of Soul! with James Baldwin; these air on December 15 and 22. Falls ill from exhaustion after returning to the United States.

Giovanni publishes My House. Joins National Council of Negro Women. Receives an honorary doctorate from Wilberforce University, becoming the youngest person so honored by the nation's oldest Black college. Truth Is On Its Way receives NATRA's (National Association of Television and Radio Announcers) Award for Best Spoken Word Album. Receives widespread attention from print media, including publications such as Jet, Newsweek, The Washington Post, and Ebony. Appears frequently on Soul! and is a guest on The Tonight Show. Plays an active role in a new publication undertaken by her friend Ida Lewis, Encore, later renamed Encore American & Worldwide News, a Black newsmagazine. Until 1980 Giovanni acts as consultant, contributes a regular column, and helps finance the magazine. Puts on a free Father's Day concert with La Belle at Canaan Baptist Church in Harlem. Performs at Alice Tully Hall in Lincoln Center with the New York Community Choir and La Belle. Receives key to Lincoln Heights, Ohio. Reads at the Paul Laurence Dunbar Centennial in Dayton, Ohio, where she and

Paula Giddings, then an editor at Howard University Press, conceive the idea of a book composed of a conversation between Giovanni and Margaret Walker (1915–98). Travels to Walker's home in Jackson, Mississippi, in November to begin taping.

1973 Giovanni publishes Ego-Tripping and Other Poems for Young People and A Dialogue: James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni, an edited transcription of the videotaping she did with Baldwin for two episodes of Soul! Releases the album Like A Ripple On A Pond. The American Library Association names My House one of the best books of 1973. Gemini is nominated for a National Book Award. Meets Margaret Walker in Washington, D.C., to complete the tapings for their book. On May 14 receives a Woman of the Year Award from the Ladies' Home Journal; the ceremony at the Kennedy Center in Washington, airs nationwide, and Giovanni is criticized for accepting the award. Throws a thirtieth birthday party for herself on June 21 at New York's Philharmonic Hall; the recital includes an introduction by Reverend Ike and guest appearances by Wilson Pickett and Melba Moore. Is initiated as an honorary member into Delta Sigma Theta, Inc., at its convention in Atlanta in August. Takes her sister to Paris to celebrate Gary's graduation from Xavier University (Cincinnati). Receives Life Membership and Scroll from the National Council of Negro Women. Goes on an African lecture tour sponsored by USIA; brings her son and his nanny, Deborah Russell, a former student of hers at Rutgers. They visit Ghana, Swaziland, Lesotho, Botswana, Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya, and Nigeria.

1974–77 Giovanni publishes A Poetic Equation:
Conversations Between Nikki Giovanni and Margaret Walker
(1974) and The Women and the Men (1975). Releases the albums
The Way I Feel (1975), Legacies (1976), and The Reason I Like
Chocolate (1976). Receives honorary doctorates from Ripon
University; the University of Maryland, Princess Anne Campus;
and Smith College. Continues to write essays for Encore
American & Worldwide News. Lectures extensively at colleges and

universities across the country. Travels to Rome for the United Nations' First World Food Conference (1974).

1978–82 Giovanni publishes Cotton Candy On A Rainy Day and releases album with the same title (1978). Publishes Vacation Time in 1979. In 1978 her father has a stroke and is subsequently diagnosed with cancer. Giovanni moves with her son back to her parents' home in Lincoln Heights. Primary responsibility for her parents and her son, including steep medical bills, increases her speaking schedule and she has less time to devote to writing. Named an honorary commissioner for the President's Commission on the International Year of the Child. Father dies on June 8, 1982, one day after her thirty-ninth birthday.

1983–87 Giovanni publishes Those Who Ride the Night Winds (1983). Continues a heavy schedule of speaking engagements. Named Woman of the Year by the Cincinnati YWCA (1983). Teaches as a visiting professor at Ohio State University (1984-85) and as professor of creative writing at Mount Saint Joseph's College (1985–87). Receives honorary doctorates from Mount Saint Joseph's College (1985) and Mount Saint Mary College (1987). Makes a European lecture tour for USIA, visiting France, Germany, Poland, and Italy (1985). Is named to the Ohio Women's Hall of Fame (1985) and named Outstanding Woman of Tennessee (1985). Receives The Cincinnati Post's Post-Corbett Award and serves as Duncanson artist in residence at the Taft Museum in Cincinnati (1986). Is the subject of a PBS documentary, Spirit to Spirit (1987). Thomas graduates from high school and enlists in the Army. Accepts position as Commonwealth Visiting Professor of English at Virginia Tech, in Blacksburg, Virginia. Her mother moves to California to live with Gary. Serves on the Ohio Humanities Council. Judges the Robert F. Kennedy Book Awards.

1988 Giovanni publishes Sacred Cows . . . and Other Edibles. Receives honorary doctorate from Fisk University.

Cincinnati bi-centennial honoree. Spirit to Spirit receives the Silver Apple Award from the Oakland Museum Film Festival. Receives the Ohioana Library Award for Sacred Cows. McDonald's institutes the Nikki Giovanni Poetry Award. USIA selects Spin a Soft Black Song for inclusion in its Exhibition to the Soviet Union. Vacation Time receives the Children's Reading Roundtable of Chicago Award. National Festival of Black Storytelling initiates the Nikki Giovanni Award for Young African American Storytellers. Begins a writing group at Warm Hearth Village, a retirement home.

1989–91 Giovanni accepts a permanent position as tenured full professor of English at Virginia Tech and relocates to Blacksburg, Virginia. Edits an anthology by her Warm Hearth writers group, *Appalachian Elders: A Warm Hearth Sampler*. Receives honorary doctorate from Indiana University. Attends Utrecht International Poetry Festival as the featured poet. "Two Friends" is incorporated as a permanent tile wall exhibit by the Oxnard Public Library in California. Thomas enrolls in Morehouse College. Continues to lecture on campuses across the country during the spring. Serves on the advisory board of the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy (1990–96).

edition of Ego-Tripping and Other Poems for Young Readers (1993), which includes new poems. Publishes Racism 101 (essays) and Knoxville, Tennessee (illustrated children's book). Edits and publishes Grand Mothers: A Multicultural Anthology of Poems, Reminiscences, and Short Stories About the Keepers of Our Traditions. Receives honorary doctorates from Otterbein College (1992), Rockhurst College (1993), and Widener University (1993). Featured Poet at Portland (Oregon) Art Beat Festival. Receives Community Volunteer of the Year Award from Warm Hearth Village. Writes and presents a poem commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Mount Vernon Slave Memorial ("But

Since You Finally Asked"). Conducts interview with the astronaut Mae Jemison for *Essence* magazine. Is Martin Luther King, Jr., Visiting Professor at the University of Oregon (1992). Is Hill Visiting Professor at the University of Minnesota (1993). Continues to receive keys to the major cities in America; to date, these include Dallas, Miami, New York, New Orleans, Baltimore, Los Angeles, Mobile, and a dozen or so more. Receives the Tennessee Writer's Award from the *Nashville Banner*. Thomas graduates magna cum laude from Morehouse College (1994). Her mother and sister relocate to Virginia (1994).

1995 In mid-January Giovanni is diagnosed with lung cancer. Travels to Cincinnati for a second opinion and has surgery at Jewish Hospital. Receives honorary doctorates from Albright College and Cabrini College. Is a week-long writer in residence for the National Book Foundation's Family Literacy Program at the Family Academy in Harlem. In summer is visiting professor at Indiana University, Kokomo.

1996-97 Giovanni publishes The Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni, The Genie in the Jar (illustrated children's book), The Sun Is So Quiet (illustrated children's book), Shimmy Shimmy Shimmy Like My Sister Kate: Looking at the Harlem Renaissance Through Poems (all 1996), and Love Poems (1997). Releases Nikki in Philadelphia (1997). Receives honorary doctorate from Allegheny College (1997). Reads for "A Celebration of Lorraine Hansberry," a benefit sponsored by the Schomburg Library. Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni nominated for NAACP Image Award. Reads for Literacy Partners Benefit Reading at Lincoln Center. Receives the Langston Hughes Award. Is Artist in Residence for the Philadelphia Clef Club of Jazz and Performing Arts. Travels on book tour. Continues to do a spring lecture tour. Named Gloria D. Smith Professor of Black Studies at Virginia Tech (1997-99). Serves on the national advisory board of the National Underground Museum and Freedom Center (1997–).

1998–99 Giovanni publishes Blues: For All the Changes (1999) and edits and publishes Grand Fathers: Reminiscences, Poems, Recipes, and Photos of the Keepers of Our Tradition (1999). Receives honorary doctorates from Delaware State University (1998), and Martin University and Wilmington University (1999). Named University Distinguished Professor at Virginia Tech, the highest honor the university confers (1999). Wins NAACP Image Award for Love Poems (1998). Attends Millennium Evening at the White House. Inducted into the National Literary Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent. Receives Appalachian Medallion Award. Wins the 1998 Tennessee Governor's Award in the Arts.

2000–01 Giovanni receives NAACP Image Award for Blues: For All the Changes (2000). Wins the 2000 Virginia Governor's Award for the Arts. Receives honorary doctorates from Manhattanville College, State University of West Georgia (2000), and Central State University (2001). Named to the Gihon Foundation's 2000 Council of Ideas. Serves as poetry judge for the National Book Awards (2000). Receives Certificate of Commendation from the U.S. Senate (2000). Serves on the board of trustees of Cabrini College (2001–03). Serves on the board of directors of Mill Mountain Theater (of Roanoke, Virginia) (2001–).

2002–03 Giovanni publishes Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea: Poems and Not Quite Poems (2002). Caedmon records and releases The Nikki Giovanni Poetry Collection (2002). Receives honorary doctorates from Pace University (2002) and West Virginia University (2003). Featured in Foundations of Courage . . . A Cry to Freedom! on BET. Appears in A&E television's Witness: James Baldwin. Wins NAACP Image Award for Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea (2003). Judge for the Robert F. Kennedy Book Awards (2002). Serves on Multimedia Advisory Panel for the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (2002–). Receives

the first Rosa Parks Woman of Courage Award (2002). Inducted into Phi Beta Kappa, Delta of Tennessee Chapter, Fisk University (2003). Performs a tribute to Gwendolyn Brooks with Elizabeth Alexander, Ruby Dee, and Yusef Komunyakaa (2003). Contributes to a Smithsonian special exhibition, *In the Spirit of Martin: The Living Legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King*, *Jr.*



Black Feeling Black Talk

1968



Detroit Conference of Unity and Art

(For HRB)

We went there to confer On the possibility of Blackness And the inevitability of Revolution

We talked about Black leaders And Black Love

We talked about
Women
And Black men
No doubt many important
Resolutions
Were passed
As we climbed Malcolm's ladder

But the most Valid of them All was that Rap chose me

On Hearing "The Girl with the Flaxen Hair"

He has a girl who has flaxen hair My woman has hair of gray I have a woman who wakes up at dawn His girl can sleep through the day

His girl has hands soothed with perfumes sweet She has lips soft and pink My woman's lips burn in midday sun My woman's hands—black like ink

He can make music to please his girl Night comes I'm tired and beat He can make notes, make her heart beat fast Night comes I want off my feet

Maybe if I don't pick cotton so fast Maybe I'd sing pretty too Sing to my woman with hair of gray Croon softly, Baby it's you.

You Came, Too

I came to the crowd seeking friends
I came to the crowd seeking love
I came to the crowd for understanding

I found you

I came to the crowd to weep I came to the crowd to laugh

You dried my tears You shared my happiness

I went from the crowd seeking you I went from the crowd seeking me I went from the crowd forever

You came, too

(For TW)

For three hours (too short for me)
I sat in your home and enjoyed
Your own special brand of Southern
Hospitality

And we talked

I had come to learn more about you

To hear a human voice without the Top Ten in the background

You offered me cheese and Horowitz and It was relaxing You gave me a small coke And some large talk about being Black And an individual

You had tried to fight the fight I'm fighting And you understood my feelings while you Picked my brains and kicked my soul

It was a pleasant evening When He rises and Black is king I won't forget you

(For BMC No. 1)

I stood still and was a mushroom on the forest green With all the *moiles* conferring as to my edibility It stormed and there was no leaf to cover me I was water-logged (having absorbed all that I could) I dreamed I was drowning That no sun from Venice would dry my tears But a silly green cricket with a pink umbrella said Hello Tell me about it And we talked our way through the storm

Perhaps we could have found an inn
Or at least a rainbow somewhere over
But they always said
Only one Only one more
And Christmas being so near
We over identified

Though I worship nothing (save myself)
You were my savior—so be it
And it was
Perhaps not never more or ever after
But after all—once you were mine

Our Detroit Conference

(For Don L. Lee)

We met in The Digest Though I had Never Known You

Tall and Black But mostly in The Viet Cong Image

You didn't smile

Until we had traded Green stamps for Brownie Points

Poem 🛚

(For Dudley Randall)

So I met this man Who was a publisher When he was young

Who is a poet now

Gentle and loving and Very patient With a Revolutionary Black woman

Who drags him to meetings

But never quite Gets around to saying

I love you

Poem

(For BMC No. 2)

There were fields where once we walked Among the clover and crab grass and those Funny little things that look like cotton candy

There were liquids expanding and contracting In which we swam with amoebas and other Afro-Americans

The sun was no further than my hand from your hair

Those were barefoot boy with cheeks of tan days And I was John Henry hammering to get in

I was the camel with a cold nose

Now, having the tent, I have no use for it I have pushed you out

Go 'way Can't you see I'm lonely

Personae Poem

(For Sylvia Henderson)

I am always lonely for things I've never had and people I've never been

But I'm not really sad because you once said Come and I did even though I don't like you And this silly wire (which some consider essential) Connected us And we came together

So I put my arms around you to keep you From falling from a tree (there is evidence that you have climbed too far up and are not at all functional with this atmosphere or terrain) And if I had a spare I'd lend you my oxygen tent

But you know how selfish people are When they have something at stake

So we sit between a line of Daggers And if all goes well

They will write Someday That you and I did it

And we never even thought for sure (if thought was one of the processes we employed) That it could be done

Poem

(No Name No. 1)

And every now and then I think About the river

Where once we sat Upon the bank Which You robbed

And I let you

Wasn't it fun

Poem

(For BMC No. 3)

But I had called the office And the voice across the line Swore up and down (and maybe all the way 'round) That you wouldn't be in

Until 11:00 A.M.

So I took a chance And dialed your phone

And was really quite content After you said Hello

But since I had previously Been taught By you especially That you won't say Hello More than once

I picked a fight

Black Separatism

It starts with a hand Reaching out in the night And pretended sleep

We may talk about our day At the office Then again Baseball scores are just As valid As the comic page At break fast

The only thing that really Matters
Is that it comes

And we talk about the **kids** Signing our letters

YOURS FOR FREEDOM

A Historical Footnote to Consider • Only When All Else Fails

(For Barbara Crosby)

While it is true
(though only in a factual sense)
That in the wake of a
Her-I-can comes a
Shower
Surely I am not
The gravitating force
that keeps this house
full of panthers

Why, LBJ has made it quite clear to me
He doesn't give a
Good goddamn what I think
(else why would he continue to masterbate in public?)

Rhythm and Blues is not
The downfall of a great civilization
And I expect you to
Realize
That the Temptations
have no connection with
The CIA

We must move on to the true issues of Our time like the mini-skirt Rebellion And perhaps take a Closer look at Flour Power It is for Us
to lead our people
out of the
Wein-Bars
into the streets
into the streets
(for safety reasons only)
Lord knows we don't
Want to lose the
support
of our Jewish friends

So let us work for our day of Presence When Stokely is in The Black House And all will be right with Our World

Poem •

(No Name No. 2)

Bitter Black Bitterness
Black Bitter Bitterness
Bitterness Black Brothers
Bitter Black Get
Blacker Get Bitter
Get Black Bitterness
NOW

The True Import of Present Dialogue, Black vs. Negro

(For Peppe, Who Will Ultimately Judge Our Efforts)

Nigger

Can you kill

Can you kill

Can a nigger kill a honkie

Can a nigger kill the Man

Can you kill nigger

Huh? nigger can you

kill

Do you know how to draw blood

Can you poison

Can you stab-a-Jew

Can you kill huh? nigger

Can you kill

Can you run a protestant down with your

'68 El Dorado

(that's all they're good for anyway)

Can you kill

Can you piss on a blond head

Can you cut it off

Can you kill

A nigger can die

We ain't got to prove we can die

We got to prove we can kill

They sent us to kill

Japan and Africa

We policed europe

Can you kill

Can you kill a white man

Can you kill the nigger

in you

Can you make your nigger mind

die

Can you kill your nigger mind And free your black hands to strangle Can you kill Can a nigger kill Can you shoot straight and Fire for good measure Can you splatter their brains in the street Can you kill them Can you lure them to bed to kill them We kill in Viet Nam for them We kill for UN & NATO & SEATO & US And everywhere for all alphabet but BLACK Can we learn to kill WHITE for BLACK Learn to kill niggers Learn to be Black men

A Short Essay of Affirmation Explaining Why

 $(With\ Apologies\ to\ the\ Federal\ Bureau\ of\ Investigation)$

Honkies always talking 'bout Black Folks Walking down the streets Talking to themselves (They say we're high or crazy)

But recent events have shown We know who we're talking to

That little microphone
In our teeth
Between our thighs
Or anyplace
That may have needed
Medical attention
Recently
My mail has been stopped
And every morning
When I awake
I speak to
Lessy-in-the-wall
Who bangs behind
My whole Rap

This is a crazy country

They use terms like Psychosis and paranoid With us But we can't be Black
And not be crazy
How the hell would anyone feel
With a mechanical dick
in his ass
lightening the way
for whitey

And we're supposed to jack off behind it

Well I'm pissed off

They ain't getting
Inside
My bang
or
My brain
I'm into my Black Thing
And it's filling all
My empty spots

Sorry 'bout that, Miss Hoover

(No Name No. 3)

The Black Revolution is passing you bye negroes

Anne Frank didn't put cheese and bread away for you

Because she knew it would be different this time

The naziboots don't march this year

Won't march next year

Won't come to pick you up in a

honka honka VW bus

So don't wait for that

negroes

They already got Malcolm

They already got LeRoi

They already strapped a harness on Rap

They already pulled Stokely's teeth

They already here if you can hear properly

negroes

Didn't you hear them when 40 thousand Indians died

from exposure to

honkies

Didn't you hear them when Viet children died from

exposure to napalm

Can't you hear them when Arab women die from exposure to isrealijews

You hear them while you die from exposure to wine and poverty programs

If you hear properly

negroes

Tomorrow was too late to properly arm yourself

See can you do an improper job now

See can you do now something, anything, but move now

negro

If the Black Revolution passes you bye it's for damned

Sure

the whi-te reaction to it won't

Wilmington Delaware

Wilmington is a funni Negro
He's a cute little gingerbread man who stuffs his pipe
with
Smog and gas fumes and maybe (if you promise
not to tale)
Just a little bit of . . . pot
Because he has to meet his maker each and everyday
LORD KNOWS HE'S A GOOD BOY
AND TRIES HARD
While most of us have to go to church only once a week

They tell me he's up for the coloredman-of-the-year award
And he'll probably win
(If he'd just stop wetting on himself each and everytime he meets a Due-pontee)
LORD KNOWS HE TRIES

Why just the other day I heard him say NO
But he was only talking to the janitor and I believe
they
expect him to exercise some control over the
excretionary
facilities around here
(But it's a start)
My only real criticism is that he eats his daily
nourishment at the "Y"
And I was taught that's not proper to do in public

But he's sharp, my but that boy is sharp
Why it took the overlords two generations to recognize
that negroes had moved to the East side of town (which is
similar to

but not the same as the wrong side of the tracks)
And here he is making plans for future whites who
haven't even
reclaimed the best land yet

"Don't say nothing Black or colored or look unhappy"
I heard him tell his chief joints
And every bone bopped in place but quick
(He can really order some colored people around—
a sight to behold)
And does a basically good militant shuffle
when dancing is in order

I'd really like to see him party more but he swears Asphalt is bad for his eye-talian shoes And we all appreciate eye-tal don't we

I tried to talk to him once but he just told me "Don't be emotional"

And all the while he was shaking and crying and raining blows on poor black me

So I guess I'm wrong again
Just maybe I don't know the coloure of my
truefriends
As Wilmington pointed out to me himself
But I'm still not going to anymore banquits

The last one they replaced jello with jellied gas (a Due-pontee specialty; housewise)
And I couldn't figure out what they were trying to tell me
Wilmington said they were giving me guest treat-meants

But somehow I don't feel welcome So I'm going to pack my don-key (asswise) and split before they start to do me favors too

Letter to a Bourgeois Friend Whom Once I Loved

(And Maybe Still Do If Love Is Valid)

The whole point of writing you is pointless and somewhere in the back of my mind I really do accept that. But on the other hand the whole point of points is pointless when it's boiled all the way down to the least common denominator. But I was never one to deal with fractions when there are so many wholes that cannot be dissected—at least these poor hands lack both skill and tool and perhaps this poor heart lacks even the inclination to try because emotion is in and of itself a wasteful thing because it lacks the power to fulfill itself. And power is to be sought. I see, after talking with you I did see, that Johnson sent his storm troopers into Detroit and that's wrong and the wrong is not what we have done but what Johnson and all the johnsons before him have done and it's wrong that we hate but it's even more wrong to love when neither love nor hate have anything to do with what must be done. And Rap does love and maybe he won't tomorrow or the next day and if he does maybe it won't be with me but if we must love then I must love you and him and all other people.

Or I must not deal with love at all. And if we are not to deal with love then we must not deal with emotion because if not love then we deal with hate or fear or anxiety or just anything but The Problem which is what we must deal with if we are to get back to love and hate and anxiety and all those foolish emotions. Which is what we're talking about. And you are angry

with me maybe because you think I'll get hurt (if indeed you care) or maybe because you think you'll get hurt but not at all because I hate because you know I don't hate and not because I'm violent because you know I'm not violent so perhaps you are not angry at all but just give slightly a shade left of a good goddamn what the hell happens to me and whether or not I want to share it with you and the truth being that I should give a bout face and act like an adult except that adulthood has no room for me because adulthood implies another adult to relate to and there are no adults only children whose balloons are bursting spit all over their faces and having never tasted spit let alone eaten any shit or licked any ass you think that liquid on your face is rain from Heaven and maybe you hope if it rains hard enough all the wrinkles will disappear and the fountain of youth, having been presented to you by our friend and neighbor, will be yours for-ever surrounded by flashing lights on the outside instead of the terrible hammer inside which beats the sweat or fans the cold and sometimes buckles your knees. So we move to needs which must be met and I confess with a smile on my lips that my needs are far more important to me than your needs are to me and even though your needs mean something to me they are only important insofar as your needs have a need to meet mine.

And your needs lack significance to me when your need is to get away from me and my needs.

Which is why I'm currently going through a thing which is the only accurate description of my emotional goulash, as if you've never been lonely and basically afraid but recognizing that fear is an invalid emotion and so is loneliness but being afraid and lonely

nonetheless. I called you but you have a job.

Which is no longer inclusive of me or maybe I just developed a bad case of paranoia which in the next thousand years may be understood by all the people everywhere who can understand how it feels to be lonely and afraid when there is no place for emotion. And that has to upset your world which I fully intend to do even if I don't like doing it because likes or dislikes have nothing to do with what has to be done—even to you with whom I'd dearly like to do nothing at all. My, but you hurt.

I'm Not Lonely

i'm not lonely sleeping all alone

you think i'm scared but i'm a big girl i don't cry or anything

i have a great big bed to roll around in and lots of space and i don't dream bad dreams like i used to have that you were leaving me anymore

now that you're gone
i don't dream
and no matter
what you think
i'm not lonely
sleeping
all alone

Love Poem

(For Real)

it's so hard to love people who will die soon

the sixties have been one long funeral day the flag flew at half-mast so frequently seeing it up i wondered what was wrong

it will go back to half on inauguration day (though during the johnson love in the pole was cut the mourning wasn't official)

the Jews are seeking
sympathy
cause there isn't one Jew
(and few circumcised women)
in the cabinet
old mother no dick plans
to keep it
bare
it's impossible to love
a Jew

united quakers and crackers for death, inc.

are back in the driver's seat it hertz and i pledge allegiance to the removal of all pain

it's masochistic (derived from colored meaning sick to kiss massa) to love honkies

riderless horses backward boots the eternal flame of the flammable Black Man who does not plan to screw honkies to death

it's so easy to love
Black Men
they must not die anymore

and we must not die with america their day of mourning is our first international holiday

it's a question of power which we must wield if it is not to be wielded against us

For an Intellectual Audience

i'm a happy moile the opposite of which is an unhappy womblie

and the only way you'll ever understand this poem is if you sit on your ear three times a day facing south justa whistling dixie while nikki picks her nose

if you miss nose
picking time
then you must collect
three and one half milograms
of toe jam
and give it to barbara's cat

and if you can't find barbara's cat

then how you gonna call yourself a black man?

Black Power

(For All the Beautiful Black Panthers East)

But the whole thing is a miracle—See?

We were just standing there talking—not touching or smoking
Pot
When this cop told
Tyrone
Move along buddy—take your whores outa here

And this tremendous growl From out of nowhere Pounced on him

Nobody to this very day Can explain How it happened

And none of the zoos or circuses
Within fifty miles
Had reported
A panther
Missing

Seduction **

```
one day
vou gonna walk in this house
and i'm gonna have on a long African
gown
you'll sit down and say "The Black . . . "
and i'm gonna take one arm out
then you-not noticing me at all-will say "What about
this brother . . . "
and i'm going to be slipping it over my head
and you'll rap on about "The revolution . . ."
while i rest your hand against my stomach
you'll go on—as you always do—saying
"I just can't dig . . ."
while i'm moving your hand up and down
and i'll be taking your dashiki off
then you'll say "What we really need . . . "
and i'll be licking your arm
and "The way I see it we ought to . . . "
and unbuckling your pants
"And what about the situation . . ."
and taking your shorts off
then you'll notice
your state of undress
and knowing you you'll just say
"Nikki,
isn't this counterrevolutionary . . . ?"
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Word Poem

(Perhaps Worth Considering)

as things be / come let's destroy then we can destroy what we be / come let's build what we become when we dream

Black Judgement

1968



The Dance Committee

(Concerning Jean-Léon Destiné)

I am the token negro
I sit in the colored section with Fanon in hand
(to demonstrate my militancy)
and a very dry martini
(ingredients: yellow grass and a green faggot
over lightly)
while circumcised flies buzz brassy smells over my head

The women (obviously my superiors)
White sharp lines
and light-blue mascara
reaching all the way down beyond the red neck
crossing the middle age spread
form a double V (at home and the office)
spinning spidery daydreams of cloth
once covering and once removed
dripping babies

I asked why
the group wouldn't be in the Black community
(it was Black French—which I should point out
has nothing to do with sex)
And was told quite soundlee
that just because they're colored don't
mean they're not artists too
THEY'RE ARTISTS TOO AND COLOR
AIN'T GOT NOTHING TO DO WITH IT
AND WHY OH WHY WON'T YOU PEOPLE
LET US FORGET YOU'RE COLORED TOO

Token Negroes I do believe, at least I was told,

and it is very important for future exchanges And again I must point out sex is not the issue that we should simply fuck tokenism

Of Liberation

Dykes of the world are united Faggots got their thing together (Everyone is organized) Black people these are facts Where's your power

Honkies rule the world
Where's your power Black people
(There are those who say it's found in the root of all evil)
You are money
You seek property
Own yourself
3/5 of a man
100% whore
Chattel property
All of us
The most vital commodity in america
Is Black people
Ask any circumcised honkie

There are relevant points to be considered, Black People Honkies tell niggers don't burn "violence begets you nothing my fellow americans" But they insist on straightened hair They insist on bleaching creams It is only natural that we would escalate

It has been pointed out:

"If we can't out fight them, we can't out vote them"

These are relevant points to consider

If 10% honkies can run south africa
then

10% Black people (which has nothing to do with negroes)

can run america

These are facts

It has been pointed out:
"The last bastion of white supremacy
is in the Black man's mind"
(Note—this is not a criticism of brothers)

Everything comes in steps
Negative step one: get the white out of your hair
Negative step two: get the white out of your mind
Negative step three: get the white out of your parties
Negative step four: get the white out of your meetings

BLACK STEP ONE:

This is unfortunate but necessary

Get the feeling out (this may be painful—endure)
BLACK STEP TWO:
Outline and implement the program
All honkies and some negroes will have to die

Black law must be implemented
The Black Liberation Front must take responsibility
For Black people
If the choice is between the able and the faithful
The faithful must be chosen
Blackness is its own qualifier
Blackness is its own standard
There are no able negroes
White degrees do not qualify negroes to run
The Black Revolution

The Black Liberation Front must set the standards These are international rules

Acquaint yourself with the Chinese, The Vietnamese,

The Cubans
And other Black Revolutions
We have tried far too long to ally with whites
Remember the rule of thumb:
WILD ANIMALS CAN BE TRAINED
BUT NEVER TAMED

The honkie is this category Like any beast he can be trained with varying degrees of excellence to

- 1) eat from a table
- 2) wash his hands
- 3) drive an automobile or bicycle
- 4) run a machine
- 5) And in some rare cases has been known to speak This is training, Black people, And while it is amusing It is still a circus we are watching Barnum and Bailey are the minds behind president Johnson

You would not trust your life to a wolf or a tiger no matter how many tricks they can learn You would not turn vour back on a cobra Even if it can dance Do not trust a honkie They are all of the same family The Black Liberation Front has free jobs to offer for those concerned about the unemployed The sisters need to make flags (there are no nations without a flag) The Red Black and Green must wave from all our buildings as we build our nation Even the winos have a part—they empty the bottles which the children can collect Teen-age girls can fill with flammable liquid and stuff with a rag

Professor Neal says a tampax will do just fine Ammunition for gun and mind must be smuggled in Support your local bookstore Dashikis hide a multitude of Revolution Support your local dress shop

As all reports have indicated our young men are primary
On the job training is necessary
Support your local rebellion—
send a young man into the streets

Our churches must bless these efforts in the name of our Black God
Far too long we have been like Jesus
Crucified
It is time for The Resurrection of Blackness
"A little child shall lead them" for the Bible tells me so
And we shall follow our children into battle

Our choice a decade ago was war or dishonor (another word for integration) We chose dishonor We got war

Mistakes are a fact of life
It is the response to error that counts
Erase our errors with the Black Flame
Purify our neighborhoods with the Black Flame
We are the artists of this decade
Draw a new picture with the Black Flame
Live a new life within the Black Flame

Our choice now is war or death Our option is survival Listen to your own Black hearts

Poem for Black Boys

(With Special Love to James)

Where are your heroes, my little Black ones You are the Indian you so disdainfully shoot Not the big bad sheriff on his faggoty white horse

You should play run-away-slave or Mau Mau These are more in line with your history

Ask your mothers for a Rap Brown gun
Santa just may comply if you wish hard enough
Ask for CULLURD instead of Monopoly
DO NOT SIT IN DO NOT FOLLOW KING
GO DIRECTLY TO STREETS
This is a game you can win

As you sit there with your all understanding eyes You know the truth of what I'm saying Play Back-to-Black Grow a natural and practice vandalism

These are useful games (some say a skill is even learned)
There is a new game I must tell you of
It's called Catch The Leader Lying
(and knowing your sense of the absurd
you will enjoy this)

Also a company called Revolution has just issued a special kit for little boys called Burn Baby
I'm told it has full instructions on how to siphon gas and fill a bottle

Then our old friend Hide and Seek becomes valid Because we have much to seek and ourselves to hide from a lecherous dog

And this poem I give is worth much more than any nickel bag or ten cent toy
And you will understand all too soon
That you, my children of battle, are your heroes
You must invent your own games and teach us old ones how to play

Concerning One Responsible Negro with Too Much Power

scared? are responsible negroes running scared?

i understand i'm to be sued and you say you can't fight fifteen hundred national guards men so you'll beat the shit out of poor Black me (no doubt because i've castrated you)

dynamite came to your attention and responsible negroes tell the cops

your tongue must be removed since you have no brain to keep it in check

aren't you turned around teaching tolerance how can i tolerate genocide my cup is full and you already know we have no ability to delay gratification

i only want to reclaim myself
i even want you
to reclaim yourself
but more and more i'm being convinced
that your death

responsible negro is the first step toward my reclamation

it's very sad i'd normally stop and cry but evening is coming and i've got to negotiate for my people's freedom

Reflections on April 4, 1968

What can I, a poor Black woman, do to destroy america? This is a question, with appropriate variations, being asked in every Black heart. There is one answer—I can kill. There is one compromise—I can protect those who kill. There is one copout—I can encourage others to kill. There are no other ways.

The assassination of Martin Luther King is an act of war. President johnson, your friendly uncandidate, has declared war on Black people. He is not making any distinction between us and negroes. The question—does it have rhythm? The answer—yes. The response—kill it. They have been known to shoot at the wind and violate the earth's gravity for these very reasons.

Obviously the first step toward peace is the removal of at least two fingers, and most probably three, from both hands of all white people. Fingers that are not controlled must be removed. This is the first step toward a true and lasting peace. We would also suggest blinding or the removal of at least two eyes from one of the heads of all albino freaks.

And some honkie asked about the reaction? What do you people want? Isn't it enough that you killed him? You want to tell me how to mourn? You want to determine and qualify how I, a lover, should respond to the death of my beloved? May he rest in peace. May his blood choke the life from ten hundred million whites. May the warriors in the streets go ever forth into the stores for guns and tv's, for whatever makes them happy (for only a happy people make successful Revolution) and this day begin the Black Revolution.

How can one hundred and fifty policemen allow a man to be shot? Police were seen coming from the direction of the shots. And there was no conspiracy? Just as there was no violent

reaction to his death. And no city official regretted his death but only that it occurred in Memphis. We heard similar statements from Dallas—this country has too many large Southern cities.

Do not be fooled, Black people. Johnson's footprints are the footprints of death. He came in on a death, he is presiding over a death, and his own death should take him out. Let us pray for the whole state of Christ's church.

Zeus has wrestled the Black Madonna and he is down for the count. Intonations to nadinolia gods and a slain honkie will not overcome. Let america's baptism be fire this time. Any comic book can tell you if you fill a room with combustible materials then close it up tight it will catch fire. This is a thirsty fire they have created. It will not be squelched until it destroys them. Such is the nature of revolution.

America has called itself the promised land—and themselves God's chosen people. This is where we come in, Black people. God's chosen people have always had to suffer—to endure—to overcome. We have suffered and america has been rewarded. This is a foul equation. We must now seek our reward. God will not love us unless we share with others our suffering. Precious Lord—Take Our Hands—Lead Us On.

The Funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr. *

His headstone said
FREE AT LAST, FREE AT LAST
But death is a slave's freedom
We seek the freedom of free men
And the construction of a world
Where Martin Luther King could have lived
and preached non-violence.

A Litany for Peppe

They had a rebellion in Washington this year because white people killed Martin Luther King Even the cherry blossoms wouldn't appear

Black Power and a sweet Black Peace

Just about 200 white people died because they conspired to kill Martin Luther King

And peace and power to you my child

Blessed be machine guns in Black hands All power to grenades that destroy our oppressor Peace Peace, Black Peace at all costs

We're having our spring sale 200 honkies for one non-violent

Even Wilmington Delaware (a funni negro at best) Responded appropriately

And to you my Black boy A Revolution My gift of love Blessed is he who kills For he shall control this earth.

Nikki-Rosa

childhood remembrances are always a drag if vou're Black you always remember things like living in Woodlawn with no inside toilet and if you become famous or something they never talk about how happy you were to have your mother all to yourself and how good the water felt when you got your bath from one of those big tubs that folk in chicago barbecue in and somehow when you talk about home it never gets across how much you understood their feelings as the whole family attended meetings about Hollydale and even though you remember your biographers never understand your father's pain as he sells his stock and another dream goes And though you're poor it isn't poverty that concerns you and though they fought a lot it isn't your father's drinking that makes any difference but only that everybody is together and you and your sister have happy birthdays and very good Christmases and I really hope no white person ever has cause to write about me because they never understand Black love is Black wealth and they'll Probably talk about my hard childhood and never understand that all the while I was quite happy

The Great Pax Whitie

In the beginning was the word
And the word was
Death
And the word was nigger
And the word was death to all niggers
And the word was death to all life
And the word was death to all
peace be still

The genesis was life
The genesis was death
In the genesis of death
Was the genesis of war
be still peace be still

In the name of peace
They waged the wars
ain't they got no shame

In the name of peace
Lot's wife is now a product of the Morton company
nah, they ain't got no shame

Noah packing his wife and kiddies up for a holiday row row row your boat
But why'd you leave the unicorns, noah
Huh? why'd you leave them
While our Black Madonna stood there
Eighteen feet high holding Him in her arms
Listening to the rumblings of peace
be still be still

CAN I GET A WITNESS? WITNESS? WITNESS? He wanted to know
And peter only asked who is that dude?

Who is that Black dude?

Looks like a troublemaker to me

And the foundations of the mighty mighty

Bo Man Cat holic church were laid

hallelujah jesus nah, they ain't got no shame

Cause they killed the Carthaginians in the great appian way And they killed the Moors "to civilize a nation" And they just killed the earth And blew out the sun In the name of a god Whose genesis was white And war wooed god And america was born Where war became peace And genocide patriotism And honor is a happy slave cause all god's chillun need rhythm And glory hallelujah why can't peace be still

The great emancipator was a bigot ain't they got no shame And making the world safe for democracy Were twenty million slaves nah, they ain't got no shame

And they barbecued six million
To raise the price of beef
And crossed the 38th parallel
To control the price of rice
ain't we never gonna see the light

And champagne was shipped out of the East While kosher pork was introduced To Africa

Only the torch can show the way

In the beginning was the deed And the deed was death

And the honkies are getting confused peace be still

So the great white prince
Was shot like a nigger in texas
And our Black shining prince was murdered
like that thug in his cathedral
While our nigger in memphis
was shot like their prince in dallas
And my lord
ain't we never gonna see the light
The rumblings of this peace must be stilled
be stilled be still

ahh Black people ain't we got no pride?

Intellectualism ...

sometimes i feel like i just get in everybody's way when i was a little girl i used to go read or make fudge when i got bigger i read or picked my nose that's what they called intelligence or when i got older intellectualism but it was only that i was in the way

Universality **

You see boy
is universal
It can be a
man
a woman
a child
or anything—
but normally it's
a
nigger
I was told

Knoxville, ™ Tennessee

I always like summer best vou can eat fresh corn from daddy's garden and okra and greens and cabbage and lots of barbecue and buttermilk and homemade ice-cream at the church picnic and listen to gospel music outside at the church homecoming and go to the mountains with your grandmother and go barefooted and be warm all the time not only when you go to bed and sleep

Records

it's so important to record i sit here trying to record trying to find a new profound way to say johnson is the vilest germiest beast the world has ever known in the alleged civilized times trying to record how i feel about a family being wiped out trying to explain that they have nothing against bobby he's a white millionaire several hundred times over so it must be me they are killing trying to record the feeling of shame that we Black people haven't yet committed a major assassination which very desperately must be done trying to record the ignorance of the voices

that say
i'm glad a negro
didn't do it
a negro needs to kill
something
trying to record
that this country must be
destroyed
if we are to live
must be destroyed if we are to live
must be destroyed if we are to live

Adulthood

(For Claudia)

i usta wonder who i'd be
when i was a little girl in indianapolis
sitting on doctors' porches with post-dawn pre-debs
(wondering would my aunt drag me to church sunday)
i was meaningless
and i wondered if life
would give me a chance to mean

i found a new life in the withdrawal from all things not like my image

when i was a teen-ager i usta sit on front steps conversing the gym teacher's son with embryonic eyes about the essential essence of the universe (and other bullshit stuff) recognizing the basic powerlessness of me

but then i went to college where i learned that just because everything i was was unreal i could be real and not just real through withdrawal into emotional crosshairs or colored bourgeois intellectual pretensions but from involvement with things approaching reality i could possibly have a life

so catatonic emotions and time wasting sex games were replaced with functioning commitments to logic and necessity and the gray area was slowly darkened into a Black thing

for a while progress was being made along with a certain degree

of happiness cause i wrote a book and found a love and organized a theatre and even gave some lectures on Black history

and began to believe all good people could get together and win without bloodshed

then

hammarskjöld was killed and lumumba was killed and diem was killed and kennedy was killed and malcolm was killed and evers was killed

and schwerner, chaney and goodman were killed and liuzzo was killed

and stokely fled the country and le roi was arrested

and le roi was arrested and rap was arrested

and pollard, thompson and cooper were killed and king was killed

and kennedy was killed

and i sometimes wonder why i didn't become a debutante

sitting on porches, going to church all the time, wondering

is my eye make-up on straight or a withdrawn discoursing on the stars and moon instead of a for real Black person who must now feel and inflict

pain

From a Logical Point of View

I mean it's only natural that if
water seeks its own level
The honkie would not bother with
Viet Nam
It's unworthy of him
Cause they are not ready
for the revolutionary
advanced technology
that america is trying
to put on them
and nothing is worse
than a
dream deferred

It's just those simple agrarian people trying to invoke simple land reform and maybe bring a new level of consciousness to their people

And here america is trying to teach them how to read and write and be capitalists when it's fairly obvious
to the naked
untrained
eye
that they aren't
ready
for meaningful
change
and the revolution
is only
in the honkies'
mind

I mean
if it was me
I wouldn't
try to enlighten
those
slant-eyed
bastards
who only want
to sing and
dance
and be happy
all the time
I would have had enough fooling
around with niggers

I mean really
if I had at my
disposal
a means to get
out of this world
I'd go
and let those un
grateful

coloreds try to get along without me

Dreams **

in my younger years before i learned black people aren't suppose to dream i wanted to be a raelet and say "dr o wn d in my youn tears" or "tal kin bout tal kin bout" or marjorie hendricks and grind all up against the mic and scream "baaaaaby nightandday baaaaaby nightandday" then as i grew and matured i became more sensible and decided i would settle down and just become a sweet inspiration

Revolutionary Music

you've just got to dig sly and the family stone damn the words you gonna be dancing to the music james brown can go to viet nam or sing about whatever he has to since he already told the honkie "although you happy you better try to get along money won't change you but time is taking you on" not to mention doing a whole song they can't even snap their fingers to "good god! ugh!" talking bout "i got the feeling baby i got the feeling" and "hey everybody let me tell you the news" martha and the vandellas dancing in the streets while shorty long is functioning at that junction yeah we hip to that aretha said they better think but she already said "ain't no way to love you" (and you know she wasn't talking to us) and dig the o'jays asking "must i always be a stand in for love" i mean they say "i'm a fool for being myself"

While the might mighty impressions have told the world for once and for all "We're a Winner" even our names-le roi has said-are together impressions temptations supremes delfonics miracles intruders (i mean intruders?) not beatles and animals and white bad things like young rascals and shit we be digging all our revolutionary music consciously or un cause sam cooke said "a change is gonna come"

Beautiful Black Men

(With compliments and apologies to all not mentioned by name)

i wanta say just gotta say something bout those beautiful beautiful beautiful outasight black men with they afros walking down the street is the same ol danger but a brand new pleasure

sitting on stoops, in bars, going to offices running numbers, watching for their whores preaching in churches, driving their hogs walking their dogs, winking at me in their fire red, lime green, burnt orange royal blue tight tight pants that hug what i like to hug

jerry butler, wilson pickett, the impressions temptations, mighty mighty sly don't have to do anything but walk on stage and i scream and stamp and shout see new breed men in breed alls dashiki suits with shirts that match the lining that complements the ties that smile at the sandals where dirty toes peek at me and i scream and stamp and shout for more beautiful beautiful beautiful black men with outasight afros

Woman Poem

you see, my whole life
is tied up
to unhappiness
it's father cooking breakfast
and me getting fat as a hog
or having no food
at all and father proving
his incompetence
again
i wish i knew how it would feel
to be free

it's having a job
they won't let you work
or no work at all
castrating me
(yes it happens to women too)

it's a sex object if you're pretty
and no love
or love and no sex if you're fat
get back fat black woman be a mother
grandmother strong thing but not woman
gameswoman romantic woman love needer
man seeker dick eater sweat getter
fuck needing love seeking woman

it's a hole in your shoe and buying lil' sis a dress and her saying you shouldn't when you know all too well—that you shouldn't but smiles are only something we give to properly dressed social workers not each other only smiles of i know your game sister which isn't really a smile

joy is finding a pregnant roach and squashing it not finding someone to hold let go get off get back don't turn me on you black dog how dare you care about me you ain't got no good sense cause i ain't shit you must be lower than that to care

it's a filthy house with yesterday's watermelon and monday's tears cause true ladies don't know how to clean

it's intellectual devastation of everybody to avoid emotional commitment "yeah honey i would've married him but he didn't have no degree"

it's knock-kneed mini-skirted wig wearing died blond mamma's scar born dead my scorn your whore rough heeled broken nailed powdered face me whose whole life is tied up to unhappiness cause it's the only for real thing i know

Ugly Honkies, or The Election Game and How to Win It

ever notice how it's only the ugly honkies who hate like Hitler was an ugly dude same with lyndon ike nixon hhh wallace maddox and all the governors of mississippi and you don't ever see a good-looking cop perhaps this only relates to the physical nature of the beast at best interesting for a beast and never beautiful by that black standard

if dracula came to town now
he'd look like daley
booing senator ribicoff
no pretty man himself
but at least out of the beast
category
yet all had to describe julian bond
as the handsome black legislator
which is, of course, redundant

life put muskie and huskie humphrey
on the cover
and we were struck by a thought:
"if we must be screwed—they could at least be pretty"
but the uglies kill
all the pretties
like john and bobby

and evers and king and if caroline don't look out she'll be next

arthur miller spoke of the white things jumping wildly on their feet banging their paws together hating the young only this time they were hating their young a salute to the chicago kids now you and the world knows we weren't lying a cracked skull in time may save mine (though i doubt it) and hhh says we ought to quit pretending what daley did was wrong We aren't pretending We didn't give a damn you guys ought to get yourselves together eating your kids is a sexual perversion

the politics of '68 remind us grievously of the politics of '64 the deal to put the bird and his faggoty flock in the white nest (which began in dallas) is being replayed and repaid (the downpayment being made in los angeles) with tricky dicky to win this time (the final payment chicago) cause there's only two parties in this country anti-nigger and pro-nigger

most of the pro-niggers are now dead
this second reconstruction is being aborted
as was the first
the pro-niggers council voting
the anti-niggers have guns
if we vote this season we ought to seek to make it
effective
the barrel of a gun is the best
voting machine
your best protest vote
is a dead honkie
much more effective than a yes
for gregory or cleaver

this negative bullshit they run on us is to tie us up in identification "you don't want nixon-agnew do you?" "well vote for humphrey-muskie" but all you honkies are alien to me and i reject the choice it's the same game they run about nigeria "whose side are you on?" the black side, fool how many times must i show that? taking sides is identifying and that is commitment be committed to us and don't deal with them as long as we choose one evil over another (on some bullshit theory that it's lesser) we'll have bullshit evil to deal with let's build a for real black thing called revolution

known to revolutionists as love

to organize liberal and radical honkies
this will lessen but not remove the clear and present
danger
to us
we need to continue our fight to control
all of america
honkies are just not fit to rule
these are sorry but true facts—not one honkie is fit to
rule
the worst junkie or black businessman is more humane
than the best honkie

the obvious need is a new liberal white party

no black person would have allowed
his troops to be so slaughtered
and before you scream "king king"
his promise was your picture in the paper
and your head in bandages
mccarthy (the administration's official dissident
candidate)

was not so honest

there are those who say he began with lyndon's blessings and the promise of good speaking engagements and since we have witnessed the assassination of one who didn't need the money or have the blessing we are inclined to agree

and daley talked of teddy **not making up his mind** he said no that's pretty definite

only it's sad that once again we have a chance we aren't fully

utilizing the honkies are at war to decide what to do about us and here we are trying to get into what every sensible person should be running from when we integrated the schools they began moving away from public education when we integrated the churches they started the god is dead bit now we're integrating politics and they're moving to a police state we ought to beat them to the punch and pull off our coup and take over, with arms and everything necessary, our communities

post-election note:

those of us breathing easy now that wallace wasn't elected check again that's gas you're smelling survival is still the name of the game black people still our only allies life or death still our only option let's me and you do that thing please?

Cultural Awareness

as we all probably realize on some level people are basically selfish and perhaps in some cases a little more than thoughtless mostly i would suppose because of the nature of life under this and most other systems

but someone came by and brought to my attention how ridiculously mean i was being

most people
he assured me
have followed the teachings
of the honorable maulana elijah el shabbaz
and do not have anything at all
to do with pork

and here he found when visiting me that i didn't have zig-zag papers for a kosher substitute

For Saundra

i wanted to write a poem that rhymes but revolution doesn't lend itself to be-bopping

then my neighbor
who thinks i hate
asked—do you ever write
tree poems—i like trees
so i thought
i'll write a beautiful green tree poem
peeked from my window
to check the image
noticed the school yard was covered
with asphalt
no green—no trees grow
in manhattan

then, well, i thought the sky i'll do a big blue sky poem but all the clouds have winged low since no-Dick was elected

so i thought again and it occurred to me maybe i shouldn't write at all but clean my gun and check my kerosene supply

perhaps these are not poetic times at all

Balances **

in life one is always balancing

like we juggle our mothers against our fathers

or one teacher against another (only to balance our grade average)

3 grains salt to one ounce truth

our sweet black essence or the funky honkies down the street

and lately i've begun wondering if you're trying to tell me something

we used to talk all night and do things alone together

and i've begun
(as a reaction to a feeling)
to balance
the pleasure of loneliness
against the pain
of loving you

For a Poet I Know

if you sang songs i could make a request does the same hold true of poems

i'd like a poem about me
i'm black and exist and for real
i'd like a poem about your uncle
who got out of his bed to let us screw
yeah and maybe a poem
about how i tried
to talk to you one night
and you suggested i read my own poems
what were you really thinking

i'd like to hear a poem about your wig everybody's got a wig aretha's is on her head james brown's is humphrey mine is columbia yours is the college you teach at or the people who sent you there

i want a poem telling how tired you are
of fucking women
and relating to your hospital
experiences
or maybe a poem about who you'd like
to lay beside and dream with
and a real long poem on what you dream about

i really need a rare book poem and what they mean to you and a new book poem about what you read and a joe goncalves poem about a hardworking brother and a carolyn rodgers poem about a beautiful sister

and a father poem for hoyt fuller and a jet poem because we've never been in it and a scared poem about me taking your clothes off then offering an excuse and a man poem about how you reached your Blackness or perhaps an alcoholic poem about your mother and a climbing poem about how you reached the heights and a you poem mostly cause your other poems don't tell me who you are and i having felt and tasted you know what you should know and relate to that you should write and are capable of writing a tall lean explosive poem not just a quiet half white hating poem about a black poem called a black poet that i know and would like to love again

For Teresa

and when i was all alone facing my adolescence looking forward to cleaning house and reading books and maybe learning bridge so that i could fit into acceptable society acceptably you came along and loved me for being black and bitchy hateful and scared and you came along and cared that i got all the things necessary to adulthood and even made sure i wouldn't hate my mother or father and you even understood that i should love peppe but not too much and give to gary but not all of me and keep on moving 'til i found me and now you're sick and have been hurt for some time and i've felt guilty and impotent

for not being able to give yourself to you as you gave yourself to me

My Poem

i am 25 years old black female poet wrote a poem asking nigger can you kill if they kill me it won't stop the revolution

i have been robbed
it looked like they knew
that i was to be hit
they took my tv
my two rings
my piece of african print
and my two guns
if they take my life
it won't stop
the revolution

my phone is tapped
my mail is opened
they've caused me to turn
on all my old friends
and all my new lovers
if i hate all black
people
and all negroes
it won't stop
the revolution

i'm afraid to tell my roommate where i'm going and scared to tell people if i'm coming if i sit here for the rest of my life it won't stop the revolution

if i never write
another poem
or short story
if i flunk out
of grad school
if my car is reclaimed
and my record player
won't play
and if i never see
a peaceful day
or do a meaningful
black thing
it won't stop
the revolution

the revolution is in the streets and if i stay on the 5th floor it will go on if i never do anything it will go on

Black Judgements

(Of bullshit niggerish ways)

You with your bullshit niggerish ways want to destroy me

You want to preach responsible revolution along with progressive procreation

Your desires will not be honored this season

Shivering under the armour of your white protector fear not for thou art evil The audacity of wanting to be near the life of what you seek to kill

Can you love can you hate is your game any damn good

Black Judgements are upon you Black Judgements are upon you

Re: Creation

1970



For Tommy

to tommy who:
eats chocolate cookies and lamb chops
climbs stairs and cries when i change
his diaper
lets me hold him only on his schedule
defined my nature
and gave me a new name (mommy)
which supersedes all others
controls my life
and makes me glad
that he does

Two Poems:

From Barbados

the mother palm had plaited her daughter's hair for us to sit under while her bad little boy cloud wet in public grape trees stretched the moon across the sand shadows

each nation sharing its **natural** gift to enhance a cultural exchange

my use of english
has not always been
spoken
as you now know
and your english
cast in the middle of salt and sand
isn't just the "little" the guide
book tells us of

there is something more Bajan to your language and more african to my response

in muted conversation we met and i take with me your english gift

For Harold Logan

(Murdered by "persons unknown" cause he wanted to own a Black club on Broadway)

he was just a little
gangster with a high
voice
and a poetic mind that recognized
genius and let it grow

but someone pruned his life

he didn't lie or steal could give you measure for emotion he paid for what he wanted and had

but someone stole his life

the sanitation committee had a big meeting concerning broadway said the lights weren't bright like they used to be

a cleaning man came and removed his life said Broadway was getting too dusty

No Reservations

(for Art Jones)

there are no reservations for the revolution

no polite little clerk to send notice to your room saying you are WANTED on the battlefield

there are no banners
to wave you forward
no blaring trumpets
not even a blues note
moaning wailing lone blue note
to the yoruba drums saying
strike now shoot
strike now fire
strike now run

there will be no grand
parade
and a lot thrown round
your neck
people won't look up and say
"why he used to live next to me
isn't it nice
it's his turn now"

there will be no recruitment station where you can give the most convenient hours "monday wednesday i play ball friday night i play cards any other time i'm free" there will be no reserve of energy no slacking off till next time "let's see—i can come back next week better not wear myself out this time"

there will be reservations only if we fail

Alone :

i can be
alone by myself
i was
lonely alone
now i'm lonely
with you
something is wrong
there are flies
everywhere
i go

For Two Jameses (Ballantine and Snow) In iron cells

we all start
as a speck
nobody notices us
but some may hope
we're there
some count days and wait

we grow
in a cell that spreads
like a summer cold
to other people
they notice and laugh
some are happy
some wish to stop
our movement

we kick and move are stubborn and demanding completely inside the system

they put us in a cell to make us behave never realizing it's from cells we have escaped and we will be born from their iron cells new people with a new cry

For Gwendolyn Brooks

brooks start with cloud condensation allah crying for his lost children

brooks babble from mountain tops to settle in collecting the earth's essence

pure spring fountain of love knowledge for those who find and dare drink of it

Autumn Poems

the heat
you left with me
last night
still smolders
the wind catches
your scent
and refreshes
my senses

i am a leaf falling from your tree upon which i was impaled

Rain .

rain is
god's sperm falling
in the receptive
woman how else
to spend
a rainy day
other than with you
seeking sun and stars
and heavenly bodies
how else to spend
a rainy day
other than with you

Poem for Lloyd **

it's a drag sitting around waiting for death gotta do something before i die

it's so lonely dying
all alone
gotta do something
before i die
gotta gotta get a gun
walking talking thinking gun
before i die

they're so lonely funeral dirges hip black angry funeral dirges gotta gotta get a gun it's so lonely when you die gotta gotta get a gun to kill death

Housecleaning *

i always liked house cleaning
even as a child
i dug straightening
the cabinets
putting new paper on
the shelves
washing the refrigerator
inside out
and unfortunately this habit has
carried over and i find
i must remove you
from my life

Poem for Aretha

cause nobody deals with Aretha—a mother with four children—having to hit the road they always say "after she comes home" but nobody ever says what it's like to get on a plane for a three week tour the elation of the first couple of audiences the good feeling of exchange the running on the high you get from singing good and loud and long telling the world what's on your mind

then comes the eighth show on the sixth day the beginning to smell like the plane or bus the if-you-forget-your-toothbrush

in-one-spot-you-can't-brush-until-the-second-show the strangers

pulling at you cause they love you but you having no love to give back

and singing the same songs night after night day after day and if you read the gossip columns the rumors that your husband

is only after your fame

the wondering if your children will be glad to see you and maybe

the not caring if they are the scheming to get out of just one show and go just one place where some doe-doe-dupaduke

won't say "just sing one song, please"

nobody mentions how it feels to become a freak because you have talent and how no one gives a damn how you feel but only cares that aretha franklin is here like maybe that'll stop: chickens from frying eggs from being laid crackers from hating

and if you say you're lonely or scared or tired how they always just say "oh come off it" or "did you see how they loved you did you see huh did you?" which most likely has nothing to do with you anyway and i'm not saying aretha shouldn't have talent and i'm certainly

not saying she should quit singing but as much as i love her i'd vote "yes" to her doing four concerts a year and staying home or doing whatever

she wants and making records cause it's a shame the way we are killing her

we eat up artists like there's going to be a famine at the end of those three minutes when there are in fact an abundance of talents just waiting let's put some

of the giants away for a while and deal with them like they

a life to lead

Aretha doesn't have to relive billie holiday's life doesn't have to relive dinah washington's death but who will stop the pattern

she's more important than her music—if they must be separated— and they should be separated when she has to pass out before anyone recognizes she needs a rest and i say i need aretha's music she is undoubtedly the one person who put everyone on

notice

she revived johnny ace and remembered lil green aretha sings

"i say a little prayer" and dionne doesn't

want to hear it anymore

aretha sings "money won't change you"

but james can't sing "respect" the advent

of Aretha pulled ray charles from marlboro country

and back into

the blues made nancy wilson

try one more time forced

dionne to make a choice (she opted for the movies)

and diana ross had to get an afro wig pushed every

Black singer into Blackness and negro entertainers

into negroness you couldn't jive

when she said "you make me/feel" the blazers

had to reply "gotta let a man be/a man"

aretha said "when my soul was in the lost and found/you came along to claim it" and joplin said "maybe"

there has been no musician whom her very presence hasn't affected when humphrey wanted her to campaign she said "woeman's only hueman"

and he pressured james brown

they removed otis cause the combination was too strong the impressions had to say "lord have mercy/we're moving on up"

the Black songs started coming from the singers on stage and the dancers

in the streets

aretha was the riot was the leader if she had said "come

let's do it" it would have been done

temptations say why don't we think about it

think about it

think about it

Revolutionary Dreams

i used to dream militant dreams of taking over america to show these white folks how it should be done i used to dream radical dreams of blowing everyone away with my perceptive powers of correct analysis i even used to think i'd be the one to stop the riot and negotiate the peace then i awoke and dug that if i dreamed natural dreams of being a natural woman doing what a woman does when she's natural i would have a revolution

Walking Down Park

walking down park
amsterdam
or columbus do you ever stop
to think what it looked like
before it was an avenue
did you ever stop to think
what you walked
before you rode
subways to the stock
exchange (we can't be on
the stock exchange
we are the stock
exchanged)

did you ever maybe wonder
what grass was like before
they rolled it
into a ball and called
it central park
where syphilitic dogs
and their two-legged tubercular
masters fertilize
the corners and side-walks
ever want to know what would happen
if your life could be fertilized
by a love thought
from a loved one
who loves you

ever look south
on a clear day and not see
time's squares but see
tall Birch trees with sycamores
touching hands

and see gazelles running playfully after the lions ever hear the antelope bark from the third floor apartment

ever, did you ever, sit down and wonder about what freedom's freedom would bring it's so easy to be free you start by loving yourself then those who look like you all else will come naturally

ever wonder why
so much asphalt was laid
in so little space
probably so we would forget
the Iroquois, Algonquin
and Mohicans who could caress
the earth

ever think what Harlem would be like if our herbs and roots and elephant ears grew sending a cacophony of sound to us the parrot parroting black is beautiful black is beautiful owls sending out whooooo's making love . . . and me and you just sitting in the sun trying to find a way to get a banana tree from one of the monkeys koala bears in the trees laughing at our listlessness

ever think it's possible for us to be happy

Kidnap Poem **

ever been kidnapped by a poet if i were a poet i'd kidnap you put you in my phrases and meter you to jones beach or maybe coney island or maybe just to my house lyric you in lilacs dash you in the rain blend into the beach to complement my see play the lyre for you ode you with my love song anything to win you wrap you in the red Black green show you off to mama yeah if i were a poet i'd kid nap you

The Genie in the Jar

(for Nina Simone)

take a note and spin it around spin it around don't prick your finger take a note and spin it around on the Black loom on the Black loom careful baby don't prick your finger

take the air and weave the sky around the Black loom around the Black loom make the sky sing a Black song sing a blue song sing my song make the sky sing a Black song from the Black loom from the Black loom careful baby don't prick your finger

take the genie and put her in a jar put her in a jar wrap the sky around her take the genie and put her in a jar wrap the sky around her listen to her sing sing a Black song our Black song from the Black loom singing to me from the Black loom careful baby don't prick your finger

All I Gotta Do

all i gotta do
is sit and wait
sit and wait
and it's gonna find
me
all i gotta do
is sit and wait
if i can learn
how

what i need to do
is sit and wait
cause i'm a woman
sit and wait
what i gotta do
is sit and wait
cause i'm a woman
it'll find me

you get yours and i'll get mine if i learn to sit and wait you got yours i want mine and i'm gonna get it cause i gotta get it cause i need to get it if i learn how

thought about calling for it on the phone asked for a delivery but they didn't have it thought about going to the store to get it walked to the corner but they didn't have it

called your name
in my sleep
sitting and waiting
thought you would awake me
called your name
lying in my bed
but you didn't have it
offered to go get it
but you didn't have it
so i'm sitting

all i know
is sitting and waiting
waiting and sitting
cause i'm a woman
all i know
is sitting and waiting
cause i gotta wait
wait for it to find
me

The Game **Of Game

when all the cards are in when all the chips are counted the smiles smiled the pictures taken i wonder if they'll say you played a fair game of game?

Master Charge: Blues

it's wednesday night baby and i'm all alone wednesday night baby and i'm all alone sitting with myself waiting for the telephone

wanted you baby
but you said you had to go
wanted you yeah
but you said you had to go
called your best friend
but he can't come 'cross no more

did you ever go to bed
at the end of a busy day
look over and see the smooth
where your hump usta lay
feminine odor and no reason why
i said feminine odor and no reason why
asked the lord to help me
he shook his head "not i"

but i'm a modern woman baby ain't gonna let this get me down i'm a modern woman ain't gonna let this get me down gonna take my master charge and get everything in town

The Lion ■ In Daniel's Den

(for Paul Robeson, Sr.)

on the road to damascus to slay the christians saul saw the light and was blinded by that light and looked into the Darkness and embraced that Darkness and saul arose from the great white way saying "I Am Paul who would slay you but I saw the Darkness and I am that Darkness" then he raised his voice singing red black and green songs saying "I am the lion in daniel's den I am the lion thrown to slaughter"

do not fear the lion for he is us and we are all in daniel's den

For A Lady of Pleasure Now Retired

some small island birthed her and a big (probably) white ship took her from mother to come to america's recreation

she lives in the top of my building i only know her through her eyes she is old now not only from years but from aging

one gets the impression she was most beautiful and like good wine or a semiprecious jewel touted out for the pleasure of those who could afford her recreation

her head is always high though the set of her mouth shows it's not easy she asks nothing seems to have something to give but no one to give it to if ever she gave it to anyone

age requires happy memories like louvenia smiled when she died and though her doctor had told her not to there was pork cooking on the stove there are so many new mistakes for a lady of pleasure that can be made it shouldn't be

necessary to repeat the old ones

and it was cold
on the elevator that morning
when i spoke to her and foolishly asked
how are you
she smiled and tilted her head
at least, i said, the sun is
shining
and her eyes smiled yes
and i was glad to be
there to say through spirits
there is a new creation
to her

2nd Rapp

they ain't gonna never get rap he's a note turned himself into a million songs listen to aretha call his name

he's a light turned himself into our homes look how well we see since he came

he's a spirit turned pisces to aries alpha to omega

he's a man turned himself into Black women and we turn little hims loose on the world

A Robin's Poem

if you plant grain
you get fields of flour
if you plant seeds
you get grass
or babies
i planted once
and a robin red breast flew
in my window
but a tom cat wouldn't let it
stay

Alabama Poem

if trees could talk wonder what they'd say met an old man on the road late after noon hat pulled over to shade his eyes jacket slumped over his shoulders told me "girl! my hands seen more than all them books they got at Tuskegee" smiled at me half waved his hand walked on down the dusty road met an old woman with a corncob pipe sitting and rocking on a spring evening "sista" she called to me "let me tell you-my feet seen more than yo eyes ever gonna read" smiled at her and kept on moving gave it a thought and went back to the porch "i say gal" she called down "you a student at the institute? better come here and study these feet i'm gonna cut a bunion off soons i gets up"

i looked at her she laughed at me if trees would talk wonder what they'd tell me

Poem For Unwed Mothers

(to be sung to "The Old F.U. Spirit")

it was good for the virgin mary it was good enough for mary it was good for the virgin mary it's good enough for me

Chorus

12 Gates: ** To The City

the white man is nocturnal that's why he wants to get to the moon it's his rising sign

he's a vampire see
how he strikes between
dusk and dawn preying
on us day light
comes he has to be back
in his casket or office as
they call them now but
dracula would be quite comfortable

if the cracker were natural then the by products from his body would grow natural plants like when we are buried flowers grow see the stones that spring up among their dead

nothing violates nature all the time and even white people came south for warmth when the ice age hit europe christians should note that it was ice water and now fire cause the cracker is playing with atomic matches

allah told us all
we need to know when he called

mankind hueman beings just because they dropped the "e" the concept remains colored cause we recognize if we add "s" to hisstory why we ain't a part of it or put "n" back in democracy and you'll understand the present system war is raw any way you look at it even with a spanish touch and god is a dog

when the romans started counting they started with one and went to x an unknown mathematically speaking so we know they couldn't deal with twelve zodiac signs

aquarius died when they buried atlantis this is the age of pisces check it out

Ego Tripping

(there may be a reason why)

I was born in the congo
I walked to the fertile crescent and built
the sphinx
I designed a pyramid so tough that a star
that only glows every one hundred years falls
into the center giving divine perfect light
I am bad

I sat on the throne
drinking nectar with allah
I got hot and sent an ice age to europe
to cool my thirst
My oldest daughter is nefertiti
the tears from my birth pains
created the nile
I am a beautiful woman

I gazed on the forest and burned out the sahara desert with a packet of goat's meat and a change of clothes
I crossed it in two hours
I am a gazelle so swift so swift you can't catch me

For a birthday present when he was three I gave my son hannibal an elephant
He gave me rome for mother's day
My strength flows ever on

My son noah built new/ark and I stood proudly at the helm as we sailed on a soft summer day

I turned myself into myself and was jesus men intone my loving name All praises All praises I am the one who would save

I sowed diamonds in my back yard
My bowels deliver uranium
the filings from my fingernails are
semi-precious jewels
On a trip north
I caught a cold and blew
My nose giving oil to the arab world
I am so hip even my errors are correct
I sailed west to reach east and had to round off
the earth as I went
The hair from my head thinned and gold was laid
across three continents

I am so perfect so divine so ethereal so surreal
I cannot be comprehended
except by my permission

I mean . . . I . . . can fly like a bird in the sky . . .

A Poem/Because It Came As A Surprise To Me

homosexuality
(an invention of saul
as played to perfection by the pope)
is two people
of similar sex
DOING IT
that's all

Oppression 8

i wish i could have been oppressed by straightened hair then i wouldn't have had no problems till after emancipation when mme. walker captured our kinks

i think it would have been hip to be oppressed by greek letter organizations from APA to GDI then the very earliest i would have had problems was with the founding of howard university

or really i could dig oppression by the pig greasy though he is he always fed me or yeah let me bring it on down oppression by diana ross leaving the supremes would be choice then i wouldn't have had no problems at all till the mafia took over motown and my number one choice i swear would be neo-colonialism by bell bottom pants cause we all recognize how they have kept us in bondage for the last four hundred years

i mean i could really dig being oppressed by Black men cause that would mean at least someone i love is in power

what i'm gonna say one more time is i'm oppressed by crackers and that's what i've gotta deal with

Toy Poem

if they put you in a jack-in-the-box poet would you pop up poeming a positive poem on positive Blackness would you poet a loving rawls poem and a real st. jacques poem before they put them in a box

could you poet beyond the greek symbol into the need for fraternity

if they put you in a wind up toy would you spin out liberated woman would you spin out a feminist or feminine women have a different reality from men would you spin into the arms of a Black man or the clutch of white women

could you spin into an orphan home and liberate a Black baby

if they took our insides out would we be still Black people or would we become play toys for master players there's a reason we lose a lot it's not our game and we don't know how to score

listen here i wanna take you higher

Some Uses For Them Not Stated

the white man sent me
the EVERYTHING card
so i called the jew
to buy my house
he said: is you colored
i says: yeah! i wanna
charge my house
he said: you give me a charge
and we'll work it out
burned EVERYTHING up

the mailman brought me the bankamericard to guarantee my checks checked myself and sent it back

then on a weak day they sent the UNICard and i really needed something so i worked my juju and turned it into a man

Poem For Flora

when she was little and colored and ugly with short straightened hair and a very pretty smile she went to sunday school to hear 'bout nebuchadnezzar the king of the jews

and she would listen

shadrach, meshach and abednego in the fire

and she would learn

how god was neither north nor south east or west with no color but all she remembered was that Sheba was Black and comely

and she would think

i want to be like that

Sometimes

sometimes
when i wake up
in the morning
and see all the faces
i just can't
breathe

Poem For My Nephew

(Brother C. B. Soul)

i wish i were
a shadow
oh wow! when they put
the light on
me i'd grow
longer and taller and
BLACKER

Yeah . . . But . . .

i don't want you to think that i don't know the pain when you say sister diana don't sing like she used to cause i heard dionne making way for just like me and i remembered the expectation and the little surprises her albums used to bring the little love notes that told someone what i felt and the ultimate surprise when she didn't sing for me and my love no more and the pain was deep cause the pleasure had been so complete and i can dig when you say sing like you used to but maybe we can remember we don't poet like that no more either

Poem For A Lady Whose Voice I Like

so he said: you ain't got no talent if you didn't have a face you wouldn't be nobody

and she said: god created heaven and earth

so he said: you ain't really no hot shit they tell me plenty sisters take care better business than you

and she said: on the third day he made chitterlings and all good things to eat and said: "that's good"

so he said: if the white folks hadn't been under yo skirt and been giving you the big play you'd a had to come on uptown like everybody else

and she replied: then he took a big Black greasy rib from adam and said we will call this woeman and her name will be sapphire and she will divide into four parts that simone may sing a song

and he said: you pretty full of yourself ain't chu

so she replied: show me someone not full of herself and i'll show you a hungry person

How Do You Write A Poem?

how do you write a poem about someone so close to you that when you say ahhhhh they say chuuuu what can they ask you to put on paper that isn't already written on your face and does the paper make it any more real that without them life would be not impossible but certainly more difficult and why would someone need a poem to say when i come home if you're not there i search the air for your scent would i search any less if i told the world i don't care at all and love is so complete that touch or not we blend to each other the things that matter aren't all about baaaanging (i can be baaaanged all day long) but finding a spot where i can be free of all the physical and emotional bullshit and simply sit with a cup of coffee and say to you "i'm tired" don't you know

those are my love words and say to you "how was your day" doesn't that show i care or say to you "we lost a friend" and not want to share that loss with strangers don't you already know what i feel and if you don't maybe i should check my feelings

And Sometimes I Sit

and sometimes i sit down at my typewriter and i think not of someone cause there isn't anyone to think about and i wonder is it worth it

I Want To Sing

i want to sing
a piercing note
lazily throwing my legs
across the moon
my voice carrying all the way
over to your pillow
i want you

i need i swear to loll
about the sun
and have it smelt me
the ionisphere carrying
my ashes all
the way over
to your pillow
i want you

Ever Want To Crawl

ever want to crawl in someone's arms white out the world in someone's arms and feel the world of someone's arms it's so hot in hell if i don't sweat i'll melt

My House

1972



Legacies *

her grandmother called her from the playground

"yes, ma'am"

"i want chu to learn how to make rolls" said the old woman proudly but the little girl didn't want to learn how because she knew even if she couldn't say it that that would mean when the old one died she would be less dependent on her spirit so she said

"i don't want to know how to make no rolls"
with her lips poked out
and the old woman wiped her hands on
her apron saying "lord
these children"
and neither of them ever
said what they meant
and i guess nobody ever does

the last time i was home to see my mother we kissed exchanged pleasantries and unpleasantries pulled a warm comforting silence around us and read separate books

i remember the first time i consciously saw her we were living in a three room apartment on burns avenue

mommy always sat in the dark
i don't know how i knew that but she did

that night i stumbled into the kitchen maybe because i've always been a night person or perhaps because i had wet the bed she was sitting on a chair the room was bathed in moonlight diffused through those thousands of panes landlords who rented to people with children were prone to put in windows she may have been smoking but maybe not her hair was three-quarters her height which made me a strong believer in the samson myth and very black

i'm sure i just hung there by the door i remember thinking: what a beautiful lady

she was very deliberately waiting perhaps for my father to come home from his night job or maybe for a dream that had promised to come by "come here" she said "i'll teach you

a poem: i see the moon

the moon sees me god bless the moon and god bless me"

i taught it to my son who recited it for her just to say we must learn to bear the pleasures as we have borne the pains

A Poem for Carol

(May She Always Wear Red Ribbons)

when i was very little though it's still true today there were no sidewalks in lincoln heights and the home we had on jackson street was right next to a bus stop and a sewer which didn't really ever become offensive but one day from the sewer a little kitten with one eye gone came crawling out though she never really came into our yard but just sort of hung by to watch the folk my sister who was always softhearted but able to act effectively started taking milk out to her while our father would only say don't bring him home and everyday after school i would rush home to see if she was still there and if gary had fed her but i could never bring myself to go near her she was so loving and so hurt and so singularly beautiful and i knew i had nothing to give that would replace her one gone eye

and if i had named her which i didn't i'm sure i would have called her carol

A Fishy Poem

i have nine guppies there were ten but the mother died shortly after the birth the father runs up and down the aquarium looking

at first i thought i wasn't feeding them enough so i increased and increased until the aquarium was very very dirty then i realized he was just a guppie whose father was a goldfish and he was only following his nature

Winter Poem

once a snowflake fell
on my brow and i loved
it so much and i kissed
it and it was happy and called its cousins
and brothers and a web
of snow engulfed me then
i reached to love them all
and i squeezed them and they became
a spring rain and i stood perfectly
still and was a flower

Conversation *****

"veah" she said "my man's gone too been dead longer than you is old" "what do vou do" i asked "sit here on the porch and talk to the old folk i rock and talk and go to church most times" "but aren't vou lonely sometimes" i asked "now you gotta answer yo own question" "i guess the children help a lot vou got grandchildren haven't vou" "oh the children they come and go always in a hurry got something to do ain't no time for old folks like me" she squinted at the sun packing her jaw with bruton snuff "the old days done gone . . . and i say good-bye peoples be going to the moon and all . . . ain't that wonderful . . . to the moon" and i said "i see stars all the time aretha franklin and sly were at madison square garden recently" "what you doing here" she asked "i'm a poet" i said "that ain't no reason to be uppity" and the sun beat down on my head while a dragonfly admonished my flippancy but a blue and yellow butterfly sat on my knee i looked her square in the eve "i ain't gonna tell you" she said and turned her head "ain't gonna tell me what" i asked "what you asking me you gotta live to be seventy-nine fore you could understand anyhow" "now you being uppity" i said "yeah but i earned it" she replied and shifting her wad she clapped her hands and smiled "you been here before"

and i said "yes ma'am but would you tell me just one thing what did i learn"
and she spat out her juice
"honey if you don't know how can i"
i wanted to argue but the sun was too hot and the sky too lazy and god heaved a sigh that swept under my blouse and i felt me feeling a feeling she crossed her legs at the ankle and straightened her back
"tell you this" she said
"keep yo dress up and yo pants down and you'll be all right" and i said impatiently "old lady you got it all wrong"
"honey, ain't never been wrong yet you better get back to the city cause you one of them technical niggers and you'll have problems here"

Rituals

i always wanted to be a bridesmaid honest to god i could just see me floating down that holy aisle leading some dear friend to heaven in pink and purple organza with lots and lots of crinoline pushing the violets out from my dress hem or maybe in a more sophisticated endeavor one of those lovely sky blue slinky numbers fitting tight around my abounding twenty-eights holding a single red rose white gloves open in the back always forever made of nylon and my feet nestled gently in *chandlers* number 699 which was also the price plus one dollar to match it pretty near the dress color

wedding rituals have always intrigued me and i'd swear to friends i wouldn't say goddamn not even once no matter what neither would i give a power sign but would even comb my hair severely back and put that blue shit under my eyes i swear i wanted to be in a wedding

Poem for Stacia **

i see wonder
in little things
like thorn figurines rowing
across my table
or stacia caring
by imposing which being
such a little thing wasn't
a big imposition
and i saw a rainbow
after a very cloudy day
but i looked down to swat
a mosquito and lost
it in the midst

The World Is Not ** a Pleasant Place to Be

the world is not a pleasant place to be without someone to hold and be held by

a river would stop its flow if only a stream were there to receive it

an ocean would never laugh if clouds weren't there to kiss her tears

the world is not a pleasant place to be without someone

The Only Song I'm Singing

they tell me that i'm beautiful i know i'm Black and proud the people ask for autographs i sometimes draw a crowd i've written lots of poetry and other kinds of books i've heard that white men crumble from one of my mean looks i study hard and know my facts in fact the truth is true the only song i'm singing now is my song of you

and i'm asking you baby please please somehow show me what i need to know so i can love you right now

i've had great opportunities to move the world around whenever they need love and truth they call me to their town the president he called me up and asked me to come down but if you think you want me home i think i'll stick around

> and i'm asking you baby please baby baby show me right now most of the things i need to know so i can love you somehow

The Butterfly **

those things
which you so laughingly call
hands are in fact two
brown butterflies fluttering
across the pleasure
they give
my body

I Remember

i remember learning you jump in your sleep and smile when you wake up

at first you cuddle then one arm across my stomach then one leg touching my leg then you turn your back

but you smile when you wake up

i was surprised to know you don't care if your amp burns all night and that you could play *ohmeohmy* over and over again just because you remembered

i discovered you don't like hair in your bathroom sink and never step your wet feet onto a clean rug

you will answer your phone but you don't talk too long and you do rub my toes and make faces while you talk and your voice told her anyway that i was there

you can get up at three and make sandwiches and orange juice and tell jokes you sometimes make incoherent sentences you snore and you smile when you wake up i know you cry when you're hurt and curse when you're angry and try when you don't feel like it and smile at me when you wake up

these things i learned through a simple single touch when fleshes clashed

A Certain Peace

it was very pleasant not having you around this afternoon

not that i don't love you and want you and need you and love loving and wanting and needing you

but there was a certain peace when you walked out the door and i knew you would do something you wanted to do and i could run a tub full of water and not worry about answering the phone for your call and soak in bubbles and not worry whether you would want something special for dinner and rub lotion all over me for as long as i wanted and not worry if you had a good idea or wanted to use the bathroom and there was a certain excitement when after midnight you came home and we had coffee and i had a day of mine that made me as happy as yours did you

When I Nap M

when i nap usually after 1:30 because the sun comes in my room then hitting the northeast corner

i lay at the foot of my bed and smell the sweat of your feet in my covers while i dream

Mixed Media

on my bedroom wall hang a poster
two pen and inks one oil one framed photograph
something with a lot of color that i don't
quite know its substance
and you
cause i got tired of bathing and oiling
and waiting for you to be too tired or
too drunk and when i realized it was your smile
that turned me on i engraved it
just above the shelf where the ash tray sits
i cut your eyes and ears and nose away
leaving your lips to open me
to a very energetic
sober brother

Just a New York Poem

i wanted to take your hand and run with you together toward ourselves down the street to your street i wanted to laugh aloud and skip the notes past the marquee advertising "women in love" past the record shop with "The Spirit In The Dark" past the smoke shop past the park and no parking today signs past the people watching me in my blue velvet and i don't remember what you wore but only that i didn't want anything to be wearing you i wanted to give myself to the cyclone that is your arms and let you in the eye of my hurricane and know the calm before

and some fall evening
after the cocktails
and the very expensive and very bad
steak served with day-old baked potatoes
after the second cup of coffee taken
while listening to the rejected
violin player
maybe some fall evening
when the taxis have passed you by
and that light sort of rain
that occasionally falls
in new york begins

you'll take a thought and laugh aloud the notes carrying all the way over to me and we'll run again together toward each other yes?

[Untitled]

```
there is a hunger
    often associated with pain
    that you feel
    when you look at someone
    you used to love and enjoyed
    loving and want
    to love again
    though you know you can't
that gnaws at you
    as steadily as a mosquito
    some michigan summer
    churning his wings
    through your window screen
because the real world
    made up of baby
      clothes
                      to be washed
                      to be cooked
    food
    lullabies
                      to be sung
    smiles
                      to be glowed
    hair
                      to be plaited
    ribbons
                      to be bowed
                      to be drunk
    coffee
    books
                      to be read
                      to be cried
    tears
```

says you are a strong woman and anyway he never thought you'd really miss him

to be borne

loneliness

The Wonder Woman

(A New Dream—for Stevie Wonder)

dreams have a way
of tossing and turning themselves
around and the times
make requirements that we dream
real dreams for example
i wanted to be
a sweet inspiration in my dreams
of my people but the times
require that i give
myself willingly and become
a wonder woman

Categories **

sometimes you hear a question like "what is your responsibility as an unwed mother" and some other times you stand sweating profusely before going on stage and somebody says "but you are used to it" or maybe you look into a face you've never seen or never noticed and you know the ugly awful loneliness of being locked into a mind and body that belong to a name or non-name—not that it matters cause you feel and it felt but you have a planetrainbussubway—it doesn't matter—something to catch to take your arms away from someone you might have thought about putting them around if you didn't have all that shit to take you safely away

and sometimes on rainy nights you see an old white woman who maybe you'd really care about except that you're a young Black woman whose job it is to kill maim or seriously make her question the validity of her existence and you look at her kind of funny colored eves and you think if she weren't such an aggressive bitch she would see that if you weren't such a Black one there would be a relationship but anyway—it doesn't matter much—except you started out to kill her and now find you just don't give a damn cause it's all somewhat of a bore so you speak of your mother or sister or very good friend and really you speak of your feelings which are too personal

for anyone else
to take a chance on feeling
and you eat that godawful food and you get somehow
through it and if this seems
like somewhat of a tentative poem it's probably
because i just realized that
i'm bored with categories

Straight Talk

i'm giving up
on language
my next book will be blank
pages of various textures and hues
i have touched in
certain spots and patterns
and depending upon the mood the reader can come
with me or take me somewhere else

i smell blood a'cookin

"but why" i asked when she said "i'm afraid to see men cry" "because i depend" she replied "on their strength" "but are they any less strong for crying nylon stockings wear better if they're washed first"

mommy said it's only pot luck but you can have some

science teaches us matter
is neither created nor destroyed
and as illogical as it is there is nothing
worthwhile but people
and lord knows how irrational we are

i'll just have a scrambled egg if it's all right

the question turns on a spelling problem
i mean i hate
to squash a roach and thought about giving up
meat between the shadow
and the act falls the essence encore!

the preceding paragraph was brought to you by the letter E in the name of huemanity

an acorn to an ant is the same as a white man to a Black JOB enjoyed waiting on the lord tell me why can't i

and i'm glad i'm smart cause i know smart isn't enough and i'm glad i'm young cause "youth and truth are making love" i'm glad i'm Black not only because it's beautiful but because it's me and i can be dumb and old and petty and ugly and jealous but i still need love

your lunch today was brought to you by the polytech branch of your local spear o agnew association HEY! this is straight talk!

have a good day

Scrapbooks :

it's funny that smells and sounds return so all alone uncalled unneeded on a sweaty night as i sit armed with coffee and cigarettes waiting

sometimes it seems my life is a scrapbook

i usta get 1.50 per week for various duties unperformed while i read green dolphin street and the sun is my undoing never understanding my exclusion but knowing quite clearly the hero is always misunderstood though always right in the end

roy gave me a yellow carnation that year for the junior prom

the red rose was from michael
who was the prettiest boy i'd ever known
he took me to the *jack* and *jill* dance
and left me sitting in the corner until
the slow drags came on then he danced
real tight and sweated out my bangs
i had a white leather monstrosity that passed
for taste in my adolescence pressed with dances
undanced though the songs were melodious

and somehow three or four books were filled with proms and parties and programs that my grandmother made me go to for "culture" so that i could be a lady my favorite is the fisk book with clippings of the *forum* and notes from the dean of women saying "you are on social probation" and "you are suspended from fisk" and letters from my mother saying "behave yourself" and letters from my grandmother reminding me "your grandfather graduated fisk in 1905" and not to try to run the school but mostly notes from alvin asking when was i coming over again i purchased a blue canvas notebook for the refrain

it's really something when you sit watching dawn peep over apartment buildings that seemed so ominous during the night and see pages of smiling pictures groups of girls throwing pillows couples staring nervously ahead as if they think the kodak will eat them someone with a ponytail and a miles davis record a lady with an afro pointing joyously to a diploma a girl in a brown tan and red bathing suit holding a baby that looks like you and now there is a black leather book filled efficiently by a clipping service and a pile of unanswered letters that remind you to love those who love you and i sit at dawn all my defenses gone sometimes listening to something cool sometimes hearing tears on my pillow and know there must be other books filled with failures and family and friends that perhaps one day i can unfold for my grandchildren

When I Die

when i die i hope no one who ever hurt me cries and if they cry i hope their eyes fall out and a million maggots that had made up their brains crawl from the empty holes and devour the flesh that covered the evil that passed itself off as a person that i probably tried to love

when i die i hope every worker in the national security council

the interpol the fbicia foundation for the development of black women gets

an extra bonus and maybe takes one day off and maybe even asks why they didn't work as hard for us as they did

them

but it always seems to be that way

please don't let them read "nikki-roasa" maybe just let some black woman who called herself my friend go around and collect

each and every book and let some black man who said it was negative of me to want him to be a man collect every picture and poster and let them burn—throw acid on them—shit

on them as

they did me while i tried

and makes black ones truly mad

to live

and as soon as i die i hope everyone who loved me learns
the meaning
of my death which is a simple lesson
don't do what you do very well very well and enjoy it
it scares white folk

but i do hope someone tells my son
his mother liked little old ladies with
their blue dresses and hats and gloves that sitting
by the window
to watch the dawn come up is valid that smiling at an
old man
and petting a dog don't detract from manhood
do
somebody please
tell him i knew all along that what would be
is what will be but i wanted to be a new person
and my rebirth was stifled not by the master
but the slave

and if ever i touched a life i hope that life knows that i know that touching was and still is and will always be the true revolution

one ounce of truth benefits like ripples on a pond one ounce of truth benefits like a ripple on a pond one ounce of truth benefits like ripples on a pond as things change remember my smile

the old man said my time is getting near
the old man said my time
is getting near
he looked at his dusty cracked boots to say
sister my time is getting near
and when i'm gone remember i smiled
when i'm gone remember
i smiled
i'm glad my time is getting there

the baby cried wanting some milk the baby cried needing some milk the baby he cried for wanting his mother kissed him gently when i came they sang a song when i was born they sang a song when i was saved they sang a song remember i smiled when i'm gone remember i smiled when i'm gone sing a good song when i'm gone we ain't got long to stay

My Tower

(For Barb and Anthony)

i have built my tower on the wings of a spider spinning slippery daydreams of paperdoll fantasies i built my tower on the beak of a dove pecking peace to a needing woman

i have built my dreams on the love of a man holding a nation in his palm asking me the time of day

i built my castle by the shore thinking
i was an oyster clammed shut forever
when this tiny grain i hardly noticed
crept inside and i spit around
and spit around and spun a universe inside
with a black pearl of immeasurable worth
that only i could spin around

i have borne a nation on my heart
and my strength shall not be my undoing
cause this castle didn't crumble
and losing my pearl made me gain
and the dove flew with the olive branch by harriet's route
to my breast and nestled close and said "you are mine"
and i was full and complete while emptying my wombs
and the sea ebbed ohhhhhhhhh
what a pretty little baby

(For Nina)

we are all imprisoned in the castle of our skins and some of us have said so be it if i am in jail my castle shall become my rendezvous my courtyard will bloom with hyacinths and jack-in-thepulpits my moat will not restrict me but will be filled with dolphins sitting on lily pads and sea horses ridden by starfish goldfish will make love to Black mollies and color my world Black Gold the vines entwining my windows will grow butterflies and yellow jackets will buzz me to sleep the dwarfs imprisoned will not become my clowns for me to scorn but my dolls for me to praise and fuss with and give tea parties to my gnomes will spin cloth of spider web silkness my wounded chocolate soldiers will sit in evening coolness or stand gloriously at attention during that midnight sun for i would have no need of day patrol if i am imprisoned in my skin let it be a dark world with a deep bass walking a witch doctor to me for spiritual consultation let my world be defined by my skin and the skin of my people for we spirit to spirit will embrace this world

on the bite of a kola nut
i was so high the clouds blanketing
africa
in the mid morning flight were pushed
away in an angry flicker
of the sun's tongue

a young lioness sat smoking a pipe while her cubs waved up at the plane look ida i called a lion waving but she said there are no lions in this part of africa it's my dream dammit i mumbled

but my grandmother stood up from her rocker just then and said you call it like you see it john brown and i are with you and i sat back for my morning coffee

we landed in accra and the people clapped and i almost cried wake up we're home and something in me said shout and something else said quietly your mother may be glad to see you but she may also remember why you went away

Africa II

africa is a young man bathing in the back of a prison fortress

the guide said "are you afro-american cape coast castle holds a lot for your people"

and the 18th century clock keeps perfect time for the time it has

i watched his black skin turn foaming white and wanted to see this magnificent man stand naked and clean before me but they called me to the dungeons where above the christian church an african stood listening for sounds of revolt

the lock the guide stated indicated a major once ran the fort and the british he said had recently demanded the lock's return and i wanted the lock maybe for a door stop to unstop the 18th century clock

"and there is one African buried here we are proud of him" he said and i screamed NO there are thousands but my voice was lost in the room of the women with the secret passageway leading to the governor's quarters

so roberta flack recorded a song and les mccann cried but a young african man on the rock outside the prison where my people were born bathed in the sunlight and africa is a baby to be tossed about and disciplined and loved and neglected and bitten on its bottom as i wanted to sink my teeth into his thigh and tell him he would never be clean until he can possess me

They Clapped

they clapped when we landed thinking africa was just an extension of the black world they smiled as we taxied home to be met black to black face not understanding africans lack color prejudice

they rushed to declare

cigarettes, money, allegiance to the mother land not knowing despite having read fanon and davenport hearing all of j.h. clarke's lectures, supporting nkrumah in ghana and nigeria in the war that there was once a tribe called afro-americans that populated the whole of africa

they stopped running when they learned the packages on the women's heads were heavy and that babies didn't cry and disease is uncomfortable and that villages are fun only because you knew the feel of good leather on good pavement

they cried when they saw mercedes benz were as common in lagos as volkswagens are in berlin

they shook their heads when they understood there was no difference between the french and the english and the americans

and the afro-americans or the tribe next door or the country across the border

they were exasperated when they heard sly and the family stone

in francophone africa and they finally smiled when little boys

who spoke no western tongue said "james brown" with reverence

they brought out their cameras and bought out africa's drums

when they finally realized they are strangers all over

and love is only and always about the lover not the beloved they marveled at the beauty of the people and the richness of the land knowing they could never possess either

they clapped when they took off for home despite the dead dream they saw a free future

Poem :

(For Anna Hedgeman and Alfreda Duster)

thinning hair estee laudered deliberate sentences chubby hands glasses resting atop ample softness dresses too long beaded down elbow length gloves funny hats ready smiles diamond rings hopeful questions needing to be needed my ladies over fifty who birthed and nursed my Blackness

h E

Atrocities

in an age of napalmed children with words like *the enemy is whatever moves* as an excuse for killing vietnamese infants

at a time when one president one nobel prize winner one president's brother four to six white students dozens of Black students and various hippies would be corralled maimed and killed

in a day where the c.i.a. could hire Black hands to pull the trigger on malcolm

during a decade that saw eight nurses in chicago sixteen people at the university of texas along with the boston strangler do a fantastic death dance matched only by the murders of john coltrane sonny liston jimi hendrixs and janis joplin

in a technological structure where featherstone and the would be old-fashioned bombed

at a moment when agnew could define hard and soft drugs on the basis of his daughter's involvement with them

in a nation where eugene robinson could testify against his own panther recruits and eldridge cleaver could expel a martyr from that martyr's creation where the president who at least knows the law would say manson who at least tried is guilty

it is only natural that joe frazier would emerge

Nothing Makes Sense

a bright sun flower yellow tiger
was at my bedroom door teeth bared ready to pounce
when the child cried "the bear is gonna get me!"
and i completely understood cause i had to really
wake up fast to keep that tiger back

nothing is real especially tones i heard a rumbling and thought the world was coming to an end

and saw my body blown to bits and crushed under the rubbish that had been the 100th street apartment complex my guppies struggled for one last breath and my turtle head hidden in his shell never to fuss again at me for not cleaning him

the blinding light started in the 96th street subway and quickly swept up to my house melting my flesh into the cactus plant at my bedside and as my hand blended into a thorn i wondered what it would be like to never hold anyone again

what never was cannot be though it engulfed me and i cried "what always is is not the answer!"

they came from all over the world in planes in boats and dirigibles on kites and pollen seeds riding bikes and horses bare back on electric roller skates and lionel trains all carrying an instrument to play or blow and bleat and the sound called all the carnivores from all over the world the aardwolf and the puma playing the talking drum even the snow leopard with a long thin hollowed ice flute came from his himalayan retreat and all the snakes over ten feet long slithered through the heavy traffic to my house to play a mass and through the altos and basses and your condescending attitude aretha started a low moan

the outline of a face on a picture isn't really
a face or an image of a face but the idea of an image
of a dream that once was dreamed by some artist
who never knew how much more real is a dream than reality

so julian bond was elected president and rap brown chief justice of the supreme court and nixon sold himself on 42nd street for a package of winstons (with the down home taste) and our man on the moon said alleluia and we all raised our right fist in the power sign and the earth was thrown off course and crashed into the sun but since we never recognize the sun we went right on to work in our factories and offices and laundry mats and record shops the next morning and only the children and a few poets knew that a change had come

I Laughed When I Wrote It

(Don't You Think It's Funny?)

the f.b.i. came by my house three weeks ago one white agent one black (or i guess negro would be more appropriate) with two three-button suits on (one to a man)

thin ties—cuffs in the bottoms—belts at their waists they said in unison:

ms. giovanni you are getting to be quite important people listen to what you have to say

i said nothing

we would like to have you give a different message i said: gee are all you guys really shorter than hoover they said:

it would be a patriotic gesture if you'd quit saying you love rap brown and if you'd maybe give us some leads

on what some of your friends are doing

i said: fuck you

a week later the c.i.a. came by two unisexes one blond afro one darker one three bulges on each showing lovely bell-

bottoms and boots

they said in rounds:

sister why not loosen up and turn on fuck the system up from the inside we can turn you on to some groovy trips and you don't have to worry about money or nothing take the commune way and a few drugs it'll be good for you and the little one

after i finished a long loud stinky fart i said serenely definitely though with love

fuck you

yesterday a representative from interpol stopped me in the park

tall, neat afro, striped hip huggers bulging only in the right place

i really dig you, he said, i want to do something for you and you alone

i asked what he would like to do for me

need a trip around the world a car bigger apartment
are you lonely i mean we need to get you comfortable
cause a lot of people listen to you and you
need to be comfortable to put forth a positive image
and digging the scene i said listen i would sell
out but i need to make it worth my while you understand
you just name it and i'll give it to you, he assured me
well, i pondered, i want aretha franklin and her piano
reduced to fit next to my electric

typewriter on my desk and i'll do anything you want he lowered his long black eyelashes and smiled a whimsical smile

fuck you, nikki, he said

On Seeing Black Journal and Watching Nine Negro Leaders "Give Aid and Comfort to the Enemy" to Quote Richard Nixon

it wouldn't have been so bad if there had been a white rock group singing "steal away" from the side lines (at least that would have made it honest)

it is not too late/is too/is not/yah yah/so yo mama/is not "Sir would you keep your remarks succinct" said straight face to people who were used to talking hours and never sucking cint

"come with me—i mean come to me—that is i got rhythm
—i mean
i can orchestrate and harmonize and ooo wee can i do a
militant
shuffle"

"well i'm from small plains oklahoma and i want to know about the sewer problem just how should black people approach them" "would whoever answers please just be brief we have important calls from all over the country!" "i want the integrationists to go on record just where do you stand on sewers?!!!??!*?

oh jesus was a lovely cat
he taught us how to pray
and every night we get on our knees
and this is what we say:
oh i hate the white man
i love the white man
and it's just a natural fact
that one way or other if you stick around
he'll get on your back

and what about naomi? for the answers to these and other important questions like: do we have any Black leaders stay tuned to (music please———)

the sets were turned off the white men stood up scratched themselves and said well we're good for another four hundred years or so

the Black youngsters turned off their sets got down on their knees and prayed oh Lord please don't take the honkie away

And Another Thing

i'm leaving at five she said why are niggers always late

a circle he replied is a sunbeam that saw itself and fell in love

niggers would be late for their own damned funerals

it's the early bird
he whispered in her
ear that catches the worm
but no one ever said why
the worm gets up

how we gonna get this country moving when we can't get together on such simple shit

sometimes he said brushing her afro back with his rough hands you scrub clothes to remove a spot and sometimes you soak them first

you not even listening to me

you're not listening to me

they looked at each other for a moment

and another thing she began

```
we stood there waiting
    on the corners
    in the bars
    on the stoops
    in the pews
    by the cadillacs
    for buses
    wanting for love
    watching to see if hope would come by
we stood there hearing
    the sound of police sirens
    and fire engines
    the explosions
    and babies crying
    the gas escaping
    and the roaches breeding
    the garbage cans falling
    and the stairways creaking
we listened
    to the books opening
    and hearts shutting
    the hands rubbing
    the bodies sweating
we were seeing the revolution screeeeeeeeching
    to a halt
    trying to find a clever way
```

to be empty

My House

i only want to be there to kiss you as you want to be kissed when you need to be kissed where i want to kiss you cause it's my house and i plan to live in it

i really need to hug you when i want to hug you as you like to hug me does this sound like a silly **poem**

i mean it's my house and i want to fry pork chops and bake sweet potatoes and call them yams cause i run the kitchen and i can stand the heat

i spent all winter in carpet stores gathering patches so i could make a quilt does this really sound like a silly poem i mean i want to keep you warm

and my windows might be **dirty** but it's my house and if i can't see out sometimes they can't see in either

english isn't a good language to express emotion through mostly i imagine because people try to speak english instead of trying to speak through it i don't know maybe it is a silly poem

i'm saying it's my house and i'll make fudge and call it love and touch my lips to the chocolate warmth and smile at old men and call that revolution cause what's real is really real and i still like men in tight pants cause everybody has some thing to give and more important needs something to take

and this is my house and you make me happy so this is your poem



The Women and the Men

1975



The Women Gather

(for Joe Strickland)

the women gather
because it is not unusual
to seek comfort in our hours of stress
a man must be buried

it is not unusual that the old bury the young though it is an abomination

it is not strange that the unwise and the ungentle carry the banner of humaneness though it is a castration of the spirit

it no longer shatters the intellect that those who make war call themselves diplomats

we are no longer surprised that the unfaithful pray loudest every sunday in every church and sometimes in rooms facing east though it is a sin and a shame

so how do we judge a man

most of us love from our need to love not because we find someone deserving

most of us forgive because we have trespassed not because we are magnanimous

most of us comfort because we need comforting our ancient rituals demand that we give what we hope to receive

and how do we judge a man

we learn to greet when meeting to cry when parting and to soften our words at times of stress

the women gather
with cloth and ointment
their busy hands bowing to laws that decree
willows shall stand swaying but unbroken
against even the determined wind of death

we judge a man by his dreams not alone his deeds

we judge a man by his intent not alone his shortcomings

we judge a man because it is not unusual to know him through those who love him

the women gather strangers to each other because they have loved a man

it is not unusual to sift through ashes and find an unburnt picture

Once a Lady Told Me

like my mother and her grandmother before i paddle around the house in soft-soled shoes chasing ghosts from corners with incense they are such a disturbance my ghosts they break my bric-a-brac and make me forget to turn my heating stove

the children say you must come to live
with us all my life i told them i've lived
with you now i shall live with myself

the grandchildren say it's disgraceful you in this dark house with the curtains pulled snuff dripping from your chin would they be happier if i smoked cigarettes

i was very exquisite once very small and well courted some would say a beauty when my hair was plaited and i was bustled up

my children wanted my life and now they want my death

but i shall pad around my house in my purple soft-soled shoes i'm very happy now it's not so very neat, you know, but it's my life

Each Sunday

if she wore her dresses the same length as mine people would gossip viciously about her morals

if i slept head barely touching the string of freshwater fake pearls mouth slightly open eyebrows knitted almost into a frown people would accuse me of running around too much

suddenly her eyes springing away from her sleep intensely scope the pulpit and fall on me

i wonder did she dream
while baking cold-water cornbread
of being a great reporter churning
all the facts together and creating
the truth
did she think while patching the torn pants
and mending the socks of her men of standing
arms outstretched before a great world
body offering her solution for peace
what did she feel wringing the neck
of Sunday's chicken breaking the beans
of her stifled life

she sits each sunday black dress falling below her knees which have drifted apart defining a void in the temple of her life in the church of her god strong and staunch and hopeful that we never change places

The December of My Springs

in the december of my springs i long for the days i shall somehow have free from children and dinners and people i have grown stale with

this time i think i'll face love with my heart instead of my glands rather than hands clutching to satiate my fingers will stroke to satisfy i think it might be good to decide rather than to need

that pitter-patter rhythm of rain sliding on city streets is as satisfying to me as this quiet has become and like the raindrop i accede to my nature

perhaps there will be no difference between the foolishness of age and the foolishness of youth some say we are responsible for those we love others know we are responsible for those who love us

so i sit waiting for a fresh thought to stir the atmosphere

i'm glad i'm not iron else i would be burned by now

The Life I Led

i know my upper arms will grow flabby it's true of all the women in my family

i know that the purple veins
like dead fish in the Seine
will dot my legs one day
and my hands will wither while
my hair turns grayish white i know that
one day my teeth will move when
my lips smile
and a flutter of hair will appear
below my nose i hope
my skin doesn't change to those blotchy
colors

i want my menses to be undifficult
i'd very much prefer staying firm and slim
to grow old like a vintage wine fermenting
in old wooden vats with style
i'd like to be exquisite i think

i will look forward to grandchildren and my flowers — all my knickknacks in their places and that quiet of the bombs not falling in cambodia settling over my sagging breasts

i hope my shoulder finds a head that needs nestling and my feet find a footstool after a good soaking with epsom salts

i hope i die warmed by the life that i tried to live

Mother's Habits

i have all my mother's habits i awake in the middle of night to smoke a cigarette i have a terrible fear of flying and i don't like being alone in the dark sleep is a sport we all participate in it's the scourge of youth and a necessity of old age though it only hastens the day when dissolution is inevitable i grow tired like my mother doing without even one small word that says i care and like my mother i shall fade into my dreams no longer caring either

The Way I Feel

i've noticed i'm happier when i make love with you and have enough left over to smile at my doorman

i've realized i'm fulfilled like a big fat cow who has just picked for a carnation contentment when you kiss your special place right behind my knee

i'm as glad as mortar on a brick that knows another brick is coming when you walk through my door

most time when you're around i feel like a note roberta flack is going to sing

in my mind you're a clock
and i'm the second hand sweeping
around you sixty times an hour
twenty-four hours a day
three hundred sixty-five days a year
and an extra day
in leap year
cause that's the way
that's the way
that's the way i feel
about you

Communication

if music is the most universal language just think of me as one whole note

if science has the most perfect language picture me as MC^2

since mathematics can speak to the infinite imagine me as 1 to the first power

what i mean is one day i'm gonna grab your love and you'll be satisfied

Luxury **

i suppose living in a materialistic society luxury to some would be having more than what you need

living in an electronic age seeing the whole world by pushing a button the *nth* degree might perhaps be adequately represented by having someone there to push the buttons for you

i have thought if only
i could become rich and famous i would
live luxuriously in new york knowing
famous people eating
in expensive restaurants calling
long distance anytime i want

but you held me one evening and now i know the ultimate luxury of your love

Poem

like a will-o'-the-wisp in the night on a honeysuckle breeze a moment sticks us together

like a dolphin being tickled on her stomach my sea of love flip-flops all over my face

like the wind blowing across a field of wheat your smile whispers to my inner ear

with the relief of recognition i bend to your eyes casually raping me

Hampton, Virginia

the birds flew south
earlier this year
and flowers wilted under the glare
of frost
nature puts her house in order

the weather reports say this will be the coldest winter already the perch have burrowed deep into the lakes and the snails are six instead of three feet under

i quilted myself
one blanket and purchased five
pounds of colored popcorn
in corners i placed dried
flowers and in my bathroom a jar
of lavender smells
my landlord stripped my windows
and i cut all my old sox for feet pads

they say you should fight the cold with the cold but since i never do anything right i called you

Poetry Is a Trestle

poetry is a trestle spanning the distance between what i feel and what i say

like a locomotive i rush full speed ahead trusting your strength to carry me over

sometimes we share a poem because people are near and they would notice me noticing you so i write X and you write O and we both win

sometimes we share a poem because i'm washing the dishes and you're looking at your news

or sometimes we make a poem because it's Sunday and you want ice cream while i want cookies

but always we share a poem because belief predates action and i believe the most beautiful poem ever heard is your heart racing

The Laws of Motion

(for Harlem Magic)

The laws of science teach us a pound of gold weighs as much as a pound of flour though if dropped from any undetermined height in their natural state one would reach bottom and one would fly away

Laws of motion tell us an inert object is more difficult to propel than an object heading in the wrong direction is to turn around. Motion being energy—inertia—apathy. Apathy equals hostility. Hostility—violence. Violence being energy is its own virtue. Laws of motion teach us

Black people are no less confused because of our Blackness than we are diffused because of our powerlessness. Man we are told is the only animal who smiles with his lips. The eyes however are the mirror of the soul

The problem with love is not what we feel but what we wish we felt when we began to feel we should feel something. Just as publicity is not production: seduction is not seductive

If I could make a wish I'd wish for all the knowledge of all the world. Black may be beautiful Professor Micheau says but knowledge is power. Any desirable object is bought and sold—any neglected object declines in value. It is against man's nature to be in either category

If white defines Black and good defines evil then men define women or women scientifically speaking describe men. If sweet is the opposite of sour and heat the absence of cold then love is the contradiction of pain and beauty is in the eye of the beheld

Sometimes I want to touch you and be touched in return. But you think I'm grabbing and I think you're shirking and Mama always said to look out for men like you

So I go to the streets with my lips painted red and my eyes carefully shielded to seduce the world my reluctant lover

And you go to your men slapping fives feeling good posing as a man because you know as long as you sit very very still the laws of motion will be in effect

Something to Be Said for Silence

there is something
to be said for silence
it's almost as sexual as moving
your bowels

i wanted to be in love
when winter came
like a groundhog i would burrow
under the patchwork pieces
of your love
but the threads are slender
and they are being stretched

i guess it's all right to want to feel though it's better to really feel and sometimes i wonder did i ever love anyone

i like my house my job i gave up my car but i bought a new coat and somewhere something is missing

i do all the right things
maybe i'm just tired
maybe i'm just tired of being tired
i feel sometimes so inert
and laws of motion being what they are
i feel we won't feel again

it's all right with me if you want to love it's all right with me if you don't my silence is at least as sexy as your love and twice as easy to take

Africa .

i am a teller of tales a dreamer of dreams shall i spin a poem around you human beings grope to strangers to share a smile complain to lovers of their woes and never touch those who need to be touched may i move on the african isn't independent he's emancipated and like the freedman he explores his freedom rather than exploits his nation worrying more about the condition of the women than his position in the world i am a dreamer of dreams in my fantasy i see a person not proud for pride is a collection of lions or a magazine in washington d.c. but a person who can be wrong and go on or a person who can be praised and still work but a person who can let a friend share a joy as easily as a friend shares a sorrow it's odd that all welcome a tale of disappointment though few a note of satisfaction have none of us been happy i am a teller of tales i see kings and noblemen slaves and serfs all selling and being sold for what end to die for freedom or live for joy i am a teller of tales We must believe in each other's dreams

i'm told and i dream
of me accepting you and you accepting yourself
will that stroke the tension
between blacks and africans
i dream of truth lubricating our words
will that ease three hundred years
and i dream of black men and women walking
together side by side into a new world
described by love and bounded by difference
for nothing is the same except oppression and shame
may i spin a poem around you
come let's step into my web
and dream of freedom together

Swaziland ...

i am old and need to remember you are young and need to learn if i forget the words will you remember the music

i hear a drum speaking of a stream the path is crossing the stream the stream is crossing the path which came first the drums ask the music is with the river

if we meet does it matter that i took the step toward you

the words ask are you fertile the music says let's dance

i am old and need to remember
you are young and want to learn
let's dance together
let's dance
together
let's
dance
together

A Very Simple Wish

i want to write an image like a log-cabin quilt pattern and stretch it across all the lonely people who just don't fit in we might make a world if i do that

i want to boil a stew with all the leftover folk whose bodies are full of empty lives we might feed a world if i do that

twice in our lives
we need direction
when we are young and innocent
when we are old and cynical
but since the old refused
to discipline us
we now refuse
to discipline them
which is a contemptuous way
for us to respond
to each other

i'm always surprised that it's easier to stick a gun in someone's face or a knife in someone's back than to touch skin to skin anyone whom we like i should imagine if nature holds true one day we will lose our hands since we do no work nor make any love if nature is true we shall all lose our eyes since we cannot even now distinguish the good from the evil

i should imagine we shall lose our souls since we have so blatantly put them up for sale and glutted the marketplace thereby depressing the price

i wonder why we don't love
not some people way on
the other side of the world with strange
customs and habits
not some folk from whom we were sold
hundreds of years ago
but people who look like us
who think like us
who want to love us why
don't we love them

i want to make a quilt of all the patches and find one long strong pole to lift it up

i've a mind to build a new world

want to play

Night

in africa night walks into day as quickly as a moth is extinguished by its desire for flame

the clouds in the caribbean carry
night like a young man
with a proud erection dripping
black dots across the blue sky
the wind a mistress of the sun howls
her displeasure at the involuntary
fertilization

but nights are white in new york the shrouds of displeasure mask our fear of facing ourselves between the lonely sheets

Poetry ...

poetry is motion graceful as a fawn gentle as a teardrop strong like the eye finding peace in a crowded room

we poets tend to think our words are golden though emotion speaks too loudly to be defined by silence

sometimes after midnight or just before the dawn we sit typewriter in hand pulling loneliness around us forgetting our lovers or children who are sleeping ignoring the weary wariness of our own logic to compose a poem no one understands it it never says "love me" for poets are beyond love it never says "accept me" for poems seek not acceptance but controversy it only says "i am" and therefore i concede that you are too

a poem is pure energy horizontally contained between the mind of the poet and the ear of the reader if it does not sing discard the ear for poetry is song
if it does not delight discard
the heart for poetry is joy
if it does not inform then close
off the brain for it is dead
if it cannot heed the insistent message
that life is precious

which is all we poets wrapped in our loneliness are trying to say

Always There Are the Children

and always there are the children

there will be children in the heat of day there will be children in the cold of winter

children like a quilted blanket are welcomed in our old age

children like a block of ice to a desert sheik are a sign of status in our youth

we feed the children with our culture that they might understand our travail

we nourish the children on our gods that they may understand respect

we urge the children on the tracks that our race will not fall short

but children are not ours
nor we theirs they are future we are past

how do we welcome the future
not with the colonialism of the past
for that is our problem
not with the racism of the past
for that is their problem
not with the fears of our own status
for history is lived not dictated

we welcome the young of all groups as our own with the solid nourishment of food and warmth we prepare the way with the solid nourishment of self-actualization

we implore all the young to prepare for the young because always there will be children

Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day

1978



Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day

Don't look now I'm fading away Into the gray of my mornings Or the blues of every night

Is it that my nails
keep breaking
Or maybe the corn
on my second little piggy
Things keep popping out
on my face
or
of my life

It seems no matter how
I try I become more difficult
to hold
I am not an easy woman
to want

They have asked
the psychiatrists psychologists politicians and social workers
What this decade will be known for
There is no doubt it is loneliness

If loneliness were a grape
the wine would be vintage
If it were a wood
the furniture would be mahogany
But since it is life it is

Cotton Candy
on a rainy day
The sweet soft essence
of possibility
Never quite maturing

I have prided myself
On being in that great tradition
albeit circus
That the show must go on
Though in my community the vernacular is
One Monkey Don't Stop the Show

We all line up
at some midway point
To thread our way through
the boredom and futility
Looking for the blue ribbon and gold medal

Mostly these are seen as food labels

We are consumed by people who sing the same old song STAY:

as sweet as yo**u are** in my corner

Or perhaps But whatever you do just a little bit longer don't change baby baby don't

change

Something needs to change

Everything some say will change

I need a change

of pace face attitude and life

Though I long for my loneliness

I know I need something

Or someone

Or

I strangle my words as easily as I do my tears
I stifle my screams as frequently as I flash my smile
it means nothing
I am cotton candy on a rainy day
the unrealized dream of an idea unborn

I share with the painters the desire To put a three-dimensional picture On a one-dimensional surface

Introspection

she didn't like to think in abstracts sadness happiness taking giving all abstracts she much preferred waxing the furniture cleaning the shelves putting the plates away something concrete to put her hands on a job well done in a specific time span

her eyes were two bright shiny six guns
already cocked
prepared to go off at a moment's indiscretion
had she been a vietnam soldier or a mercenary
for Ian Smith all the children and dogs and goodly
portions of grand old trees would have been demolished

she had lived both long and completely enough not to be chained to truth she was not pretty she had no objections to the lies lies were better than the silence that abounded nice comfortable lies like — I need you or — Gosh you look pretty this morning the lies that make the lie of life real or lies that make real life livable

she lived on the edge of an emotional abyss or perhaps she lived in the well of a void there were always things she wanted like arms to hold her eyes that understood a friend to relax with someone to touch always someone to touch

her life was a puzzle broken
into a hundred thousand little pieces
she didn't mind being emotionally disheveled
she was forever fascinated by putting the pieces
together though most times
the center was empty

she never slept well
there wasn't a time
actually
when sleep refreshed her
perhaps it could have
but there were always dreams
or nightmares
and mostly her own acknowledgment
that she was meant to be tired

she lived
because she didn't know any better
she stayed alive
among the tired and lonely
not waiting always wanting
needing a good night's rest

Forced Retirement

all problems being as personal as they are have to be largely of our own making

i know i'm unhappy most of the time nothing an overdose of sex won't cure of course but since i'm responsible i barely have an average intake

on the other hand i'm acutely aware there are those suffering from the opposite affliction

some people die of obesity while others starve to death some commit suicide because they are bored others because of pressure the new norm is as elusive as the old

granting problems coming from within are no less painful than those out of our hands i never really do worry about atomic destruction of the universe though i can be quite vexed
that Namath and Ali don't retire
my father has to
and though he's never made a million
or even hundreds of thousands
he too enjoys his work
and is good at it
but more goes
even when he doesn't
feel like it

people fear boredom
not because they are bored
rather more from fear
of boring
though minds are either sharp
or dull
and bodies available
or not
and there's something else
that's never wrong
though never quite right
either

i've always thought the beautiful are as pitiful as the ugly but the average is no guarantee of happiness

i've always wandered a bit not knowing if this is a function of creeping menopause or incipient loneliness i no longer correct my habits nothing makes sense if we are just a collection of genes on a freudian altar to the species i don't like those theories telling me why i feel as i do behaviorisms never made sense outside feeling

i could say i am black female and bright in a white male mediocre world but that hardly explains why i sit on the beaches of st croix feeling so abandoned

The New Yorkers

In front of the bank building after six o'clock the gathering of the bag people begins

In cold weather they huddle around newspapers when it is freezing they get cardboard boxes

Someone said they are all rich eccentrics Someone is of course crazy

The man and his buddy moved to the truck port in the adjoining building most early evenings he visits his neighbors awaiting the return of his friend from points unknown to me they seem to be a spontaneous combustion these night people they evaporate during the light of day only to emerge at evening glow as if they had never been away

I am told there are people
who live underground
in the layer between the subways
and the pipes that run them
they have harnessed the steam
to heat their corner
and cook their food
though there is no electricity
making them effectively moles

The twentieth century has seen
two big wars and two small ones
the automobile and the SST
telephones and satellites in the sky
man on the moon and spacecraft on Jupiter
How odd to also see the people
of New York City living
in the doorways of public buildings
as if this is an emerging nation
though of course it is

Look at the old woman who sits on 57th Street and 8th Avenue selling pencils I don't know where she spends the night she sits summer and winter snow or rain humming some white religious song she must weigh over 250 pounds the flesh on her legs has stretched like a petite pair of stockings onto a medium frame beyond its ability to fit there are tears and holes of various purples in her legs things and stuff ooze from them drying and running again there is never a smell though she does not ask you to buy a pencil nor will her eyes condemn your health it's easy really to walk by her unlike the man in front of Tiffany's she holds her pencils near her knee

vou take or not depending upon your writing needs

He on the other hand is blind and walking his german shepherd dog his sign says THERE BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD GOES YOU and there is a long explanation of his condition It's rather easy for the Tiffany shopper to see his condition he is Black

Uptown on 125th Street is an old blind Black woman she is out only in good weather and clothes her house is probably spotless as southern ladies are wont to keep house and her wig is always on straight

You got something for me, she called

What do you want, I asked

What's yo name? I know yo family

No, you don't, I said laughing You don't know anything about me

You that Eyetalian poet ain't you? I know yo voice. I seen you on television

I peered closely into her eyes

You didn't see me or you'd know I'm black

Let me feel yo hair if you Black Hold down yo head

I did and she did

Got something for me, she laughed

You felt my hair that's good luck

Good luck is money, chile she said

Good luck is money

Crutches

it's not the crutches we decry it's the need to move forward though we haven't the strength

women aren't allowed to need so they develop rituals since we all know working hands idle the devil women aren't supposed to be strong so they develop social smiles and secret drinking problems and female lovers whom they never touch except in dreams

men are supposed to be strong
so they have heart attacks
and develop other women
who don't know their weaknesses
and hide their fears
behind male lovers
whom they religiously touch
each saturday morning on the basketball court
it's considered a sign of health doncha know
that they take such good care
of their bodies

i'm trying to say something about the human condition maybe i should try again

if you broke an arm or leg
a crutch would be a sign of courage
people would sign your cast
and you could bravely explain
no it doesn't hurt—it just itches

but if you develop an itch there are no salves to cover the area in need of attention and for whatever guilt may mean we would feel guilty for trying to assuage the discomfort and even worse for needing the aid

i really want to say something about all of **us** am i shouting i want you to hear me

emotional falls always are the worst and there are no crutches to swing back on i am in a box on a tight string subject to pop without notice

everybody says how strong i am

only black women and white men are truly free they say

it's not difficult to see how stupid they are

i would not reject my strength though its source is not choice but responsibility

i would not reject my light though my wrinkles are also illuminated

something within demands action or words if action is not possible

i am tired of being boxed muhammad ali must surely be pleased that leon spinks relieved him most of the time i can't breathe i smoke too much to cover my fears sometimes i pick my nose to avoid the breath i need

i do also do the same injustice to my poems

i write because i have to

i have considered
my reluctance
to be a fear of death
there are all sorts of reasons
i don't want to die
responsibility to family
obligations to friends
dreams of future greatness
i close my eyes and chant
on airplanes to calm
my fleeting heart
since we are riding on air
my will is as necessary
as the pilot's abilities
to keep us afloat

i have felt that way about other endeavors

however do we justify our lives the president of the united states says Faith not deeds will determine our salvation that's probably why larry flynt a stand-in for carter is without his insides now i have faith of course in the deeds i do and see done one really can't hate the act but love the actor only jewish theater and american politics would even contemplate such a contradiction however will we survive the seventies

i seize on little things you can tell a lot about people by the way they comb their hair or the way they don't look you in the eye

am i discussing nixon again

he went to humphrey's funeral and opened his house (2.50 per head) for the public to see can't decide if anita bryant should marry carter or nixon they both are so bad they deserve her

there must be something fun worth sharing

there is a split between the jewish and black community the former didn't mind until the latter put a name to it

i live in a city
that has turned into a garbage can
there is no disagreement
about that
there is some question

concerning the dog dung in the streets as opposed to the dog dung in the administration

ahhhh but you will say
how awful of the poet
such insinuations she does make
nobody is perfect
i do after all have
this well reluctance

A Poem Off Center

how do poets write so many poems my poems get decimated in the dishes the laundry my sister is having another crisis the bed has to be made there is a blizzard on the way go to the grocery store did you go to the cleaners then a fuse blows a fuse always has to blow the women soon find themselves talking either to babies or about them no matter how careful we are we end up giving tips on the latest new improved cleaner and the lotion that will take the smell away

if you write a political poem
you're anti-semitic
if you write a domestic poem
you're foolish
if you write a happy poem
you're unserious
if you write a love poem
you're maudlin
of course the only real poem
to write
is the go to hell writing establishment poem
but the readers never know who
you're talking about which brings us back
to point one

i feel i think sorry for the women they have no place to go

it's the same old story blacks
hear all the time
if it's serious a white man
would do it
when it's serious
he will
everything from writing a poem
to sweeping the streets
to cooking the food
as long as his family doesn't eat it

it's a little off center this life we're leading maybe i shouldn't feel sorry for myself but the more i understand women the more i do

The Winter Storm

somewhere there was a piano playing but not in the bar where she was sitting

somewhere across the candlelights like a ship threading its way through the morning fog two people were surely moving toward completion

she knew she had feelings that were unfulfilled

there must certainly be a revolution somewhere but she couldn't see it the idea of fulfillment baffled her

most assuredly she remembered

the sheets were clean
and he was tender
it was an accident
that rush of red wine starting with her toes
that came over her ending with a sigh
she had always hated people
who had to talk and instruct
or give indiscreet encouragement
she had laughed and laughed
what a marvelous thing you have discovered
she told him

she looked to see if anyone was happy in the bar in which she was sitting

how many aeons had it been how many men enough to make her secure in her desirability too many to allow herself to say she loved them all remembering the names was the hardest though she always retained the ability to rate them what indeed made sex so fascinating to everyone at best it's a tooth in a pain that rubbing the gums will ease at worst it's a desire denied like the eves closing to the evening's sunset

she looked and crossed her support-hosed legs in the bar with the music just out of reach

one always remembers passion whether fantasy or fact that rush of pure glandular energy what really did she feel

she straightened her gray flannel panel skirt pulling her gray silk blouse tight against her breasts rubbing her left arm with the square gold band against the chill that settled on the right she looked around at the lonely faces in the bar without the music

what made people interested in other people in whom they have no interest but yes she recalled as the drink was served there is an energy crisis that's why i'm having this drink amid a raging storm outside there is one inside too and spring will not lessen its ferocity

unconsciously as black women
are wont to do
she hummed a tune and patted her foot
to the gospel beat
the tips of the black pumps were a grayish white
the ice and salt having taken
their measure

she examined her nails
noting the cuticles needed trimming
a dim reflection from the mirror on the wall
showed her the face and form of a coward
life she justified is not heroic
but survival

tonight through the storm she would sit in a bar with only the music in her head

in the morning for sure she would go home

we tend to fear old age
as some sort of disorder that can be cured
with the proper brand of aspirin
or perhaps a bit of Ben Gay for the shoulders
it does of course pay to advertise

one hates the idea of the first gray hair a shortness of breath devastating blows to the ego indications we are doing what comes naturally

it's almost laughable
that we detest aging
when we first become aware
we want it
little girls of four or five push
with eyes shining brightly at gram or mommy
the lie that they are seven or eight
little girls at ten worry
that a friend has gotten her monthly
and she has not
little girls of twelve
can be socially crushed
by lack of nobs on their chests

little boys of fourteen want to think they want a woman the little penis that simply won't erect is shattering to their idea of manhood if perhaps they get a little peach fuzz on their faces they may survive adolescence proving there may indeed be life after high school the children begin to play older without knowing the price is weariness

age teaches us that our virtues
are neither virtuous nor our vices
foul
age doesn't matter really
what frightens is mortality
it dawns upon us that we can die
at some point it occurs we surely shall

it is not death we fear
but the loss of youth
not the youth of our teens
where most of the thinking took place
somewhere between the navel and the knee
but the youth of our thirties where career
decisions were going well
and we were respected for our abilities
or the youth of our forties
where our decisions proved if not right
then not wrong either
and the house after all is half paid

it may simply be that work
is so indelibly tied
to age that the loss
of work brings the depression
of impending death
there are so many too many
who have never worked
and therefore for whom death
is a constant companion

as lack of marriage lowers divorce rates lack of life prevents death the unwillingness to try is worse than any failure

in youth our ignorance gives us courage with age our courage gives us hope with hope we learn that man is more than the sum of what he does we also are what we wish we did and age teaches us that even that doesn't matter

Because ...

i wrote a poem for you because you are my little boy

i wrote a poem for you because you are my darling daughter

and in this poem i sang a song that says as time goes on i am you and you are me and that's how life goes on

Their Fathers

i will be bitter
when i grow old
i have seen the weakness
of our race
though i as with many others
am reluctant
to give it name

each day i face
the world through fantasies
of past glories
who i deceive i am not
at all sure
not myself
not the whites above
surely even the children
know the sterility
of their fathers

there are both reasons and excuses none are lacking in understanding the causes a cold front meeting a warm mass of air causes rain also but that reason offers less comfort than a simple raincoat

mankind alone among the mammals communicates with his species justification for his behavior

none among us lack compassion or understanding or even sympathy emotion is not a response to inaction and undoubtedly there are those who are so unfeeling they cannot represent mental or emotional health we have seen the Germans and the Israeli reaction and the Palestinian response in our own time we know the truth of the Africans and Indians we know we have only begun the horror that is waiting south of our borders and south of our latitude blood perhaps should not all ways be the answer but perhaps it always is

my people have suffered so much for so long we are pitiful in our misery

we boost our spirits
by changing our minds
rather than our condition
blacks are still rather cheap
to purchase
unemployment insurance
a grant for a program programmed to fail
enough seed money to insure bankruptcy
my people like magnificent race

horses have blinders there is always talk of the mighty past but no plans for a decent future if no man is an island black americans stand to prove a people can be a peninsula phallic like we are extended in an ocean of whiteness though that is not our problem our extension like arms on the body or legs on a trunk is essential to balance one neither walks nor stands without extensions one is not black without white nor male without female what is true of the mass is no less true of the individual

someone said the only emotion black men show is rage or anger which is only partly true the only rage and anger they show are to those who would want to love them and bear their children and with them walk into the future why do we who have offered expectation have to absorb pain

i will grow bitter in old age

because life is not a problem but a process and there are no formulas to our situation the dinosaurs became extinct ripened fruit falls from the bough and i grow tired of hoping

it's only natural
that bitterness rests within
my spirit
the air is polluted
streams are poisoned
and i have seen the hollow look
of hatred in the dull
worn faces
of their fathers

Life Cycles

she realized
she wasn't one
of life's winners
when she wasn't sure
life to her was some dark
dirty secret that
like some unwanted child
too late for an abortion
was to be borne
alone

she had so many private habits she would masturbate sometimes she always picked her nose when **upset** she liked to sit with silence in the dark sadness is not an unusual state for the black woman or writers

she took to sneaking drinks a habit which displeased her both for its effects and taste yet eventually sleep would wrestle her in triumph onto the bed

she was nervous
when he was there
and anxious
when he wasn't
life to her
was a crude cruel joke

played on the livers
she boxed her life
like a special private seed
planting it in her emotional garden
to see what weeds
would rise
to strangle
her

Adulthood II

There is always something of the child in us that wants a strong hand to hold through the hungry season of growing up

when she was a child summer lasted forever and christmas seemed never to come now her bills from easter usually are paid by the 4th of july in time to buy the ribs and corn and extra bag of potatoes for salad

the pit is cleaned and labor day is near time to tarpaulin the above ground pool

thanksgiving turkey
is no sooner soup
than the children's shoes
wear thin saying
christmas is near again
bringing the february letters asking
"did you forget
us last month"

her life looks occasionally as if it's owed to some

machine
and the only winning point
she musters is to tear
mutilate and twist
the cards demanding information
payment
and a review of her credit worthiness

she sits sometimes
in her cubicled desk
and recalls her mother
did the same things
what we have been given
we are now expected to return
and she smiles

Habits *

i haven't written a poem in so long i may have forgotten how unless writing a poem is like riding a bike or swimming upstream or loving you it may be a habit that once acquired is never lost

but you say i'm foolish
of course you love me
but being loved of course
is not the same as being loved because
or being loved despite
or being loved

if you love me why
do i feel so lonely
and why do i always wake up alone
and why am i practicing
not having you to love
i never loved you that way

if being loved by you is accepting always
getting the worst
taking the least
hearing the excuse
and never being called when you say you will
then it's a habit
like smoking cigarettes
or brushing my teeth when i awake
something i do without
thinking
but something without
which i could just as well do

most habits occur because of laziness we overdrink because our friends do we overeat because our parents think we need more flesh on the bones and perhaps my worst habit is overloving and like most who live to excess i will be broken in two by my unwillingness to control my feelings

but i sit writing
a poem
about my habits
which while it's not
a great poem
is mine
and some habits
like smiling at children
or giving a seat to an old person
should stay
if for no other reason
than their civilizing
influence

which is the ultimate habit i need to acquire

Fascinations

finding myself still fascinated
by the falls and rapids
i nonetheless prefer the streams
contained within the bountiful brown shoreline
i prefer the inland waters
to the salty seas
knowing that journeys end
as they begin
the sailor and his sail
the lover and her beloved
the light of day and night's darkness

i walk the new york streets
the heat rising in waves
to singe my knees
my head is always down
for i no longer look for you
usually i am cold no matter
what the temperature
i hunch my hands in the pockets of my pants
hoping you will be home
when i get there

i know i'm on dangerous ground
i misread your smile all year
assured that you and therefore everything
was all right
i wade from the quiet
of your presence into the turbulence
of your emotions
i have now understood a calm day
does not preclude a stormy evening
con edison after all went out
why shouldn't you

and though it took longer than anyone thought the lights did come back on why shouldn't yours electricity is a product of the sea as much as the air coming from turbulence as much as generators

if you were a pure bolt of fire cutting the skies i'd touch you risking my life not because i'm brave or strong but because i'm fascinated by what the outcome will be

(for my father)

He always had pretty legs Even now though he has gotten fat His legs have kept their shape

He swam
Some men get those legs from tennis
But he swam
In a sink-or-swim mud hole somewhere
In Alabama

When he was a young man
More than half a century ago
Talent was described by how well
A thing was done not by whom
That is considering
That Black men weren't considered
One achieved on merit

The fact that he is short
Was an idea late reaching his consciousness
He hustled the ball on the high school court
Well enough to win a college scholarship
Luckily for me
Since that's where he met my mother

I have often tried to think lately
When I first met him
I don't remember
He was a stranger
As Black or perhaps responsible fathers
Are wont to be

He worked three jobs a feat
Without precedence though not unknown
In the hills of West Virginia or the Red Clay of Georgia
What happens to a dream
When it must tunnel under
Langston says it might explode
It might also just die
Shriveling to the here and now
Confusing the dreamer til he no longer knows
Whether he is awake or asleep

Before we ourselves:

Meet the man
Lie to the bill collectors
Don't know where the mortgage payment is coming from
It's difficult to understand
A weakness

Before our mettle is tested
We easily consider ourselves strong
Before we see our children want
Not elaborate things
But a christmas bike or easter shoes
It's easy to say
what should have been done

Before we see our own possibility shrink Back into the unclonable cell From which dreams spring It's easy to condemn

If the first sign of spring is the swallows
Then the first sign of maturity is the pride
We gulp when we realize
There are few choices in life
That are clear

Seldom is good pitted against evil
Or even better against best
Mostly it's bad versus worse
And while some may intone
life is not fair
"Choice" by definition implies
Equally attractive alternatives
Or mutually exclusive experiences

Boxers protect themselves from blows
with heavily greased shoulders
Football players wear helmets
Joggers have specially made shoes
to absorb the shocks
The problem with the Life game
For unprotected players
Is not what you don't have
But what you can't give
Though ultimately there is the understanding
That even nothing is something
As long as you are there
To give the nothing personally

Black men grow inverse To the common experience

He grew younger as his children left home
He has both time and money to buy
The toys he never had
Lawn mowers saws garden equipment CB's
Steroes
Whatever is new and exciting
He smiles more often too
And his legs are still
quite exceptional
For a Grandfather

Choices *

if i can't do
what i want to do
then my job is to not
do what i don't want
to do

it's not the same thing but it's the best i can do

if i can't have what i want—then my job is to want what i've got and be satisfied that at least there is something more to want

since i can't go
where i need
to go then i must go
where the signs point
though always understanding
parallel movement
isn't lateral

when i can't express
what i really feel
i practice feeling
what i can express
and none of it is equal

i know but that's why mankind alone among the mammals learns to cry

Photography ...

the eye we are told is a camera but the film is the heart not the brain and our hands joining those that reach develop the product

it's easy sitting in the sun
to forget that cold exists
let alone envelops
the lives of people
it's easy sitting in the sun
to forget the ice and ravages
of winter yet
there are those who would have
no other season
it's always easy when thinking
we have the best to assume
others covet it
yet surf or sea each has
its lovers and its meaning
for love

watching the red sun bleed into the ocean one thinks of the beauty that fire brings if the eye is a camera and the film is the heart then the photo assistant is god

The Beep Beep Poem

I should write a poem
but there's almost nothing
that hasn't been said
and said and said
beautifully, ugly, blandly
excitingly
stay in school
make love not war
death to all tyrants
where have all the flowers gone
and don't they understand at kent state
the troopers will shoot . . . again

i could write a poem because i love walking in the rain and the solace of my naked body in a tub of warm water cleanliness may not be next to godliness but it sure feels good

i wrote a poem for my father but it was so constant i burned it up he hates change and i'm baffled by sameness

i composed a ditty
about encore american and worldwide news
but the editorial board
said no one would understand it
as if people have to be tricked
into sensitivity
though of course they do

i love to drive my car
hours on end
along back country roads
i love to stop for cider and apples and acorn squash
three for a dollar
i love my CB when the truckers talk
and the hum of the diesel in my ear
i love the aloneness of the road
when I ascend descending curves
the power within my toe delights me
and i fling my spirit down the highway
i love the way i feel
when i pass the moon and i holler to the stars
i'm coming through

Beep Beep

A Poem for Ed and Archie

I dreamed of you last night standing near the Drugstore on the St.-Germain-des-Prés You popped out of the pastry shop wiping some exotic créme from your lips showing off your new cigarette holder "Got one yet?" and your smile lit up the city of lights Southern men cannot be generalized about I know you all as liars and lynchers I have accepted the myth that though you may wear a suit beneath it the blood runs hot and your hair so similar to those whom Darwin said were all our ancestors mats against your heaving chest It's unpatriotic not to smoke tobacco we both agreed at least in North Carolina and poor Ed who will some day be a great man just sat there confused

without laughter what is the purpose my ancestors once worked for yours involuntarily and I laugh because it is only what happened not nearly the truth

I've seen Paris and you've seen me and last night in my dream we both smiled

Woman 🛎

she wanted to be a blade of grass amid the fields but he wouldn't agree to be the dandelion

she wanted to be a robin singing through the leaves but he refused to be her tree

she spun herself into a web
and looking for a place to rest
turned to him
but he stood straight
declining to be her corner

she tried to be a book but he wouldn't read

she turned herself into a bulb but he wouldn't let her grow

she decided to become a woman and though he still refused to be a man she decided it was all right a flying saucer landed
in my living room
i too am an astronaut
having applied for my own space
i welcomed the visitor
i need something intelligent
to talk to not for long
but maybe just through dinner

not being afraid of what i don't know i unanxiously awaited the emergence

should i call him a space man or might not it be a woman probably not her menses on jupiter no less than earth causes excuses for exclusion

should i shake hands and offer a glass of white wine i always wanted to know space people but how do we proceed

i think i should tell you she reported as she stepped from her craft you possibly are not seeing me depending upon the solar year you may only be seeing my aura

don't worry i assured her happy it was a woman depending upon my aura you are most likely only seeing my solar years

we sat down to talk

Poem (for EMA)

though i do wonder
why you intrigue me
i recognize that an exceptional moth
is always drawn
to an exceptional flame

you're not at all what you appear to be though not so very different

I've not learned the acceptable way of saying you fascinate me I've not even learned how to say i like you without frightening people away

sometimes I see things
that aren't really there
like warmth and kindness
when people are mean
but sometimes i see things
like fear and want to soothe it
or fatigue and want to share it
or love and want to receive it

is that weird
you think everyone is weird
though you're not really hypocritical
you just practice not being
what you want to be
and fail to understand

how others would dare to be otherwise that's weird to me flames don't flicker forever and moths are born to be burned

it's an unusual way to start a friendship but nothing lasts forever

The Rose Bush

(for Gordon)

i know i haven't grown but i don't fit beneath the rose bush by my grandmother's porch

i couldn't have grown so much though i don't see why the back of the couch doesn't hide me from my sister

the lightning that would flash
on summer days brought shouts
of you children be still the lightning's
gonna get you

we laughed my cousins and sister and i
at the foolish old people
and their backward superstitions
though lightning struck me
in new york city
and i ran
to or from what i'm not sure
but i was hit
and now i don't fit
beneath the rose bushes
anymore
anyway they're gone

Patience

there are sounds
which shatter
the staleness of lives
transporting the shadows
into the dreams

raindrops falling on leaves shatter the dust of the city as soap washed off bodies shatters the complacent dirt

she waited for him to take away that quiet

she waited for his call with the patience of a slave woman quilting or a jewish mother simmering chicken broth

there would be no other sound than his voice to shatter the quiet of her heart

she waited for him to come

Make Up

we make up our faces
for lots of reasons
to go to the movies
or some junior prom
to see ice hockey
or watch the Dodgers come home again
defeated

going to the grocery store only requires lipstick while a bridge game can mean a quick trip to the hairdresser for a touch up

i clean my make up before going to bed alone and if my mood is foul i spray the sheets with Ultra Ban

most faces are made up before the public is faced whether male female or child it's always so appropriate don'tcha know to put a little mascara around the eyes

we make up fantasies to face life we need to believe we are good on the job or at least in the bed we make up lies to impress people who are making up lies to impress us and if either took all the make up off life would not be worth living

we make up excuses to say i'm sorry that forgive me because and after all didn't i tell you why

and i make up with you because you aren't strong enough to reach out to say come home — i need you

Winter *

Frogs burrow the mud snails bury themselves and I air my quilts preparing for the cold

Dogs grow more hair mothers make oatmeal and little boys and girls take Father John's Medicine

Bears store fat chipmunks gather nuts and I collect books For the coming winter

You Are There

i shall save my poems for the winter of my dreams i look forward to huddling in my rocker with my life i wonder what i'll contemplate lovers—certainly those i can remember and knowing my life you'll be there

you'll be there in the cold like a Siamese on my knee proud purring when you let me stroke you

you'll be there in the rain like an umbrella over my head sheltering me from the damp mist

you'll be there in the dark like a lighthouse in the fog seeing me through troubled waters

you'll be there in the sun like coconut oil on my back to keep me from burning

i shall save a special poem for you to say you always made me smile and even though i cried sometimes you said i will not let you down my rocker and i on winter's porch will never be sad if you're gone the winter's cold has been stored against you will always be there

A Statement on Conservation

Scarcity in oil and gas
Can bring about a cold spell
No one cares if you conserve
As long as you can pay well

Cash is not the only tool
To purchase what we need
Dollar bills and jingling change
Are very cheap indeed

Buying power in our world Speaks to white illusion Understanding what I need I've come to this conclusion

Love is in short supply
Like leaves on a winter vine
Whether it's right or whether it's wrong
I'll pay the price for mine

Spring is late and summer soon Will come in with its heat wave We will all need energy Unless we have a cool cave

I don't mind the cold or heat And I've got a reason Love when it's spread all around Can tackle any season

Turning *

(I need a better title)

she often wondered why people spoke
of gaining years as turning
when she celebrated her thirtieth birthday she knew
she had turned though
she hadn't gained

the rain turned on her windowsill and it didn't gain and he like her face gaining wrinkles turned indifferent

she became happier without the big apartment the stereo components and the ten pounds she shed while adjusting to the loss of his love

her fault lay
in her honesty
it was always his sexiness
that held her not
his arms
it was his lovemaking not
his love she missed

she compacted her
life into one
tiny room with kitchen bed and roaches
in the four corners which contained nothing
that couldn't be stolen

or left in case she had to run for her sanity

so she turned thirty-one
with all
the introspections that nothing
not even them was meant
not to turn
and from that understanding
she gained
knowledge

A Response

(to the rock group Foreigner)

you say i'm as cold
as ice
but ice is good
for a burn
if you were a woman
you would have known that
and rubbed me
the right way
to let me cool
your passion

A Poem of Friendship **

We are not lovers because of the love we make but the love we have

We are not friends because of the laughs we spend but the tears we save

I don't want to be near you for the thoughts we share but the words we never have to speak

I will never miss you because of what we do but what we are together

Being and Nothingness

(to quote a philosopher)

i haven't done anything meaningful in so long it's almost meaningful to do nothing

i suppose i could fall in love or at least in line since i'm so discontented but that takes effort and i don't want to exert anything neither my energy nor my emotions

i've always prided myself on being a child of the sixties and we are all finished so that makes being nothing

The Moon Shines Down

the moon shines down on new york city while i smile over at you

the moon is still against the night and i am still against you

surely you must sometimes wonder won't i ever go home surely you must sometimes say poet please leave me alone

but my bad rhyme and love of night retain me here with you and though it's so sad to admit without you what would i do

of course you are no panacea for my lack of friends but if i were a hallmark card here's where we'd begin

the moon shines down on new york city while i smile over at you

That Day

if you've got the key then i've got the door let's do what we did when we did it before

if you've got the time i've got the way let's do what we did when we did it all day

you get the glass
i've got the wine
we'll do what we did
when we did it overtime

if you've got the dough then i've got the heat we can use my oven til it's warm and sweet

i know i'm bold coming on like this but the good things in life are too good to be missed

now time is money and money is sweet if you're busy baby we can do it on our feet

we can do it on the floor we can do it on the stair we can do it on the couch we can do it in the air we can do it in the grass and in case we get an itch i can scratch it with my left hand cause i'm really quite a witch

if we do it once a month
we can do it in time
if we do it once a week
we can do it in rhyme
if we do it every day
we can do it everyway
we can do it like we did it
when we did it
that day



Those Who Ride the Night Winds

1983



Charting the Night Winds

The first poem . . . ever written . . . was probably carved . . . on a cold damp cave . . . by a physically unendowed cave man . . . who wanted to make a good impression . . . on a physically endowed . . . cave woman . . . But maybe not . . . Maybe it was she . . . trying to gain the notice . . . of a hunk . . . who was in demand . . . Or perhaps . . . it was simply someone . . . who admired the motion . . . of a sabertooth tiger . . . and wanting to capture the beauty . . . picked up a sharpened rock . . . to draw . . . We know so very little . . . about the origin of the written word . . . let alone the language . . . that all conjecture deserves some consideration . . .

The fears . . . of the human race . . . are legion . . . Perhaps our size . . . strength . . . and speed . . . coupled with our ability . . . to see our weakness . . . have made us an anxious species . . . There are smaller mammals . . . There are more vulnerable life-forms . . . Yet we alone can give vent to our understanding . . . of the tenuousness of Life . . .

Nature is a patient teacher . . . She slowly changes . . . winter to summer . . . by proper use . . . of spring and fall . . . That's kind . . . of nature Humans fear . . . sudden change Hurricanes . . . Volcanoes . . . Earthquakes . . . Tornadoes . . . all are generally perceived . . . as aberrant . . . Blizzards . . . in winter . . . Electrical storms . . . in summer . . . are a part of the season . . . But change . . . both gradual . . . and violent . . . is a necessary ingredient . . . with Life . . .

Art . . . and by necessity . . . artists . . . are on the cutting edge . . . of change . . . The very fact . . . that something has been done . . . over and over again . . . is one reason . . . to change . . . Every-

thing . . . must change . . . If only through perception . . . Honor thy Father and Mother . . . does not change . . . though the understanding of long life has . . . Do unto others as you would have them do unto you . . . has not changed . . . though the application must move from the individual to the nation . . . What goes up must come down . . . will not change . . . though our rock stars and superathletes seem impervious...to the lessons of Telstar . . . There is . . . in reality . . . very little that is new . . . under the yellow sun . . . We have only rearranged the matter . . . and reconceptualized the thought...Greed...is a terrible thing . . . Envy . . . is not an acceptable emotion . . . Jealousy . . . is dangerous to your emotional life . . . and the physical and mental well-being . . . of your loved one . . . Though people say . . . they cannot change ... change we do ... in our abilities ... desires . . . understanding . . . The need to force . . . humans to change . . . may be one reason we all grow . . . older . . . though there is no corresponding gene . . . to make us grow . . . wiser . . .

In the written arts . . . language has opened . . . becoming more accessible . . . more responsive . . . to what people really think . . . and say . . . We are now free . . . to use any profane word . . . or express any profound thought . . . we may wish . . . Sexuality . . . once a great taboo in language . . . and act . . . is fully explored . . . through fiction . . . and nonfiction . . . through poetry . . . and plays . . . Different and same gender . . . different and same age . . . different and same race . . . religion . . . or creed . . . all take their places . . . on the bookshelves . . . Ideas that once allowed the State to poison Socrates . . . Ideas that once allowed the Church to force Copernicus to recant... Ideas that once encouraged McCarthy to destroy the lives of men and women . . . are now as acceptable as a stop-and-go light . . . or at least as well understood . . . as fluoride . . . While there is surely much . . . to be done . . . some change has rent . . . its ways . . . I changed . . . I chart the night winds . . . glide with me . . . I am the walrus . . . the time has come . . . to speak of many things . . .

Lorraine Hansberry:

An Emotional View

It's intriguing to me that "bookmaker" is a gambling . . . an underworld . . . term somehow associated with that which is both illegal . . . and dirty . . . Bookmakers . . . and those who play with them . . . are dreamers . . . are betting on a break . . . a lucky streak . . . that something will come . . . their way—something good . . . something clean . . . something wonderful . . . We who make books . . . we who write our dreams . . . confess our fears . . . and witness our times are not so far . . . from the underworld . . . are not so far . . . from illegality . . . are not so far from the root . . . the dirt . . . the heart of the matter.

Writers . . . I think . . . live on that fine line between insanity and genius...Either scaling the mountains...or skirting the valleys . . . Riding that lonely train of truth . . . with just enough of the player in us...to continue to hope...for the species... Writers are . . . perhaps . . . congenital hypocrites . . . I don't think preachers . . . priests . . . rabbis . . . and ayatollahs are hypocritical...because they have tubular vision...are indeed... myopic . . . They know the answer . . . before you ask the guestion . . . But the writer . . . the painter . . . the sculptor . . . the creator . . . those who work . . . with both the mind . . . and the heart of mankind . . . have no reason . . . to be hopeful . . . We have . . . in fact . . . no right to write the happy ending . . . or the love poem . . . no reason . . . to sculpt David . . . or paint . . . like Charles White . . . We who have seen . . . all sides of the coin . . . the front . . . the back . . . and the ribbed edge . . . know what the ending...will surely be...Yet we speak...to and of... courage ... love ... hope ... something better ... in mankind ... When we are perfectly honest . . . with ourselves . . . we cannot justify . . . our faith . . . Yet faith we do have . . . and continue to share.

Bookmaking is shooting craps . . . with the white boys . . . downtown on the stock exchange . . . is betting a dime you can win . . .

a hundred . . . Making books is shooting craps . . . with God . . . is wandering into a casino where you don't even know the language . . . let alone the rules of the game . . . And that's proper . . . that's as it should be . . . If you wanted to be safe . . . you would have walked into the Post Office . . . or taken a graduate degree in Educational Administration . . . If you want to share . . . a vision . . . or tell the truth . . . you pick up . . . your pen . . . And take your chances . . . This is not . . . after all . . . tennis . . . where sets can be measured by points . . . or football . . . where games run on time . . . or baseball . . . where innings structure the play . . . It is life . . . open-ended . . . And once the play has begun . . . the book made . . . time . . . is the only judge.

Time . . . to the Black American . . . has always been . . . a burden...from 1619 to now...we have played out our drama . . . before a reluctant time . . . We were either too late . . . or too early . . . No people on Earth . . . in all her history . . . has ever produced so many people ... so generally considered ... "ahead of their time." . . . From the revolts in Africa . . . to our kidnapping . . . to the martyrs of freedom today . . . our people have burdened . . . by someone else's sense . . . of appropriate . . . There are . . . of course . . . all the jokes . . . about C.P. time . . . and there are the reminders . . . by the keepers of our souls . . . that God "is never late . . . but He always comes . . . on time." . . . To be Black . . . in America . . . is to not at all understand . . . time . . . Little Linda Brown was told . . . her school would be desegregated ... "with all deliberate speed" ... and twenty-five years later . . . this is still . . . untrue . . . Dr. King was told . . . in Montgomery . . . he was pushing too hard . . . going too fast . . . expecting too much . . . I wish we had been enslaved . . . at the same rate we are being set . . . free . . . It would be . . . an entirely different story . . . I wish the battleships . . . had sailed down the Mississippi River . . . when Emmett Till was lynched . . . at the same speed they sped to Cuba . . . during the missile crisis . . . I wish food . . . had been airlifted . . . to the sharecroppers in Tennessee . . . when they were pushed off the land . . . for exercising their right to vote . . . at the same speed . . . it was airlifted . . . to West Berlin . . . at the ending of World War II . . . But I'm only a colored poet . . . and my wishes . . . no matter which star I choose . . . do not come true . . . But I'm also a writer . . . and I know . . . that the Europeans aren't the only ones . . . who keep time . . . some of the time is going . . . to be my time . . . too . . .

Life teaches us not to regret . . . not to spend too much time on what might have been . . . It is neither emotionally . . . nor intellectually possible...for me to dwell on might-have-been...I have a great love of history and antiques . . . the past is there to instruct us . . . I am socially retarded . . . so I hold on . . . to old friends . . . I like to be surrounded . . . by that which is warm and familiar . . . vet I'm sorry . . . I never met Lorraine Hansberry . . . I vividly understand that a writer is not the book she made . . . any more than a child is the print of his parents . . . Many of us are personally paranoid . . . generally uncommunicative . . . and basically unnice . . . just like most people . . . But I think Lorraine must have been one . . . of those wonderful humans who . . . seeing both sides of the dilemma . . . and all sides of the coin . . . still called "Heads"... when she tossed... And in her gamble... never came up snake eyes . . . It's not that she wrote . . . beautifully . . . and truthfully . . . though she did . . . It's not just that she anticipated . . . our people and their reactions . . . though she did . . . She also . . . when reading through . . . and between the lines . . . possessed that quality of courage . . . to say what had to be said . . . to those who needed to hear it . . . If writers are visionary . . . her ministry was successful . . . She made it . . . possible for all of us . . . to look . . . a little . . . deeper.

Hands: For Mother's Day

I think hands must be very important ... Hands: plait hair ... knead bread ... spank bottoms ... wring in anguish ... shake the air in exasperation ... wipe tears, sweat, and pain from faces ... are at the end of arms which hold ... Yes hands ... Let's start with the hands ...

My grandmother washed on Mondays...every Monday...If you were a visiting grandchild or a resident daughter...every Monday morning at 6:00 A.M....mostly in the dark...frequently in the cold...certainly alone...you heard her on the back porch starting to hum...as Black Christian ladies are prone to do...at threshold...some plea to higher beings for forgiveness and the power to forgive...

I saw a photograph once of the mother of Emmett Till . . . a slight, brown woman with pillbox hat . . . white gloves . . . eyes dark beyond pain . . . incomprehensibly looking at a world that never intended to see her son be a man . . . That same look is created each year . . . without the hat and gloves, for mother seals are not chic . . . at the Arctic Circle . . . That same look is in vogue in Atlanta, Cincinnati, Buffalo...for much the same reason... During one brief moment, for one passing wrinkle in time, Nancy Reagan wore that look . . . sharing a bond, as yet unconsummated . . . with Betty Shabazz, Jacqueline Kennedy, Coretta King, Ethel Kennedy . . . The wives and mothers are not so radically different . . . It is the hands of the women which massage the balm...the ointments...the lotions into the bodies for burial . . . It is our hands which: cover the eyes of small children . . . soothe the longing of the brothers . . . make the beds . . . set the tables . . . wipe away our own grief . . . to give comfort to those beyond comfort . . .

I yield from women whose hands are Black and rough... The women who produced me are in defiance of Porcelana and Jergens

lotion . . . are ignorant of Madge's need to soak their fingernails in Palmolive dishwashing liquid . . . My women look at cracked . . . jagged fingernails that will never be adequately disguised by Revlon's new spring reds . . . We of the unacceptably strong take pride in the strength of our hands . . .

Some people think a quilt is a blanket stretched across a Lincoln bed . . . or from frames on a wall . . . a quaint museum piece to be purchased on Bloomingdale's 30-day same-as-cash plan . . . Quilts are our mosaics . . . Michelle-Angelo's contribution to beauty . . . We weave a quilt with dry, rough hands . . . Quilts are the way our lives are lived . . . We survive on patches . . . scraps . . . the left-overs from a materially richer culture . . . the throwaways from those with emotional options . . . We do the far more difficult job of taking that which nobody wants and not only loving it . . . not only seeing its worth . . . but making it lovable . . . and intrinsically worthwhile . . .

Though trite . . . it's nonetheless true . . . that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing . . . Perhaps pitiful thing would be more accurate . . . though that too is not profound . . . The more we experience the human drama . . . the more we are to understand . . . that whatever is not quite well about us will also not quite go away . . .

Sometimes . . . when it's something like Mother's Day . . . you really do wish you were smart enough to make the pain stop . . . to make the little hurts quit throbbing . . . to share with Star Trek's Spock the ability to touch your fingertips to the temples and make all the dumb . . . ugly . . . sad things of this world ease from memory . . . It's not at all that we fail to forgive others for the hurts we have received . . . we cannot forgive ourselves for the hurts we have meted . . . So . . . of course . . . we use our hands to push away rather than to pull closer . . .

We look . . . in vain . . . for an image of mothers . . . for an analogy for families . . . for a reason to continue . . . We live . . . mostly

because we don't know any better . . . as best we can . . . Some of us are lucky . . . we learn to like ourselves . . . to forgive ourselves . . . to care about others . . . Some of us . . . on special occasions . . . watch the ladies in the purple velvet house slippers with the long black dresses come in from Sunday worship and we realize man never stood up to catch and kill prey . . . man never reared up on his hind legs to free his front parts to hold weapons . . . WOMAN stood to free her hands . . . to hold her young . . . to embrace her sons and lovers . . . WOMAN stood to applaud and cheer a delicate mate who needs her approval . . . WOMAN stood to wipe the tears and sweat . . . to touch the eyes and lips . . . that woman stood to free the arms which hold the hands . . . which hold.

This Is Not for John Lennon

(and this is not a poem)

Not more than we can bear . . . more than we should have to . . . Those of us lacking the grace to kill ourselves take it in the gut . . . from a gun or gossip . . . what's the difference . . . Anything in the name of the Lord . . . or Freud . . . and don't forget the book contracts and possible made-for-TV-movies starring that cute little buttoned-down guy who you recently saw making some sort of deal with a game show host . . . It's bad form to point out that Jesus didn't wear no shoes nor carry any guns and wasn't even known to have a choice on the presidential preference poll (though His father was quoted a lot) . . . He has been seen however a lot at football games cheering the Catholic teams on to victory . . . let us all be born just one more time . . . we may yet get it . . . right . . .

Something's wrong and this is not a poem . . . the main difference being that you didn't think it was . . . Unlike those who profess to be caring and Christian I didn't fool you . . . it's not about John Lennon either . . . he's dead . . . And the man who killed him is cutting a deal . . . with doctors whose only operations are with lawyers over how to split the money and the 15 minutes of fame Andy Warhol so solemnly promised . . . What a pitiful country this is . . . Our beloved mayor who prefers capital punishment to Jesus as a foolish belief all of a sudden defends the violence of New York by saying, "But golly gee fellows there is violence in England too" . . . Yes indeedy folks it's not the gun but the man . . . Maybe the New Right is finally right about something . . . Let's ban the men . . . Let's make them justify their existence and their right to survival . . . Let us set up a board . . . a bureaucracy even . . . where each one must come in and fill out in triplicate the reasons why he should be allowed to live . . . All potential suicides need not bother to apply . . . They can save us all grief by killing them real selves instead of they play selves . . . Strange isn't it if you try to live by getting a job or creating one there is no help... If you

try to die by drugs or pills or slicing your wrists you become very very significant . . . No . . . Not more than we can bear . . . more than we ought to . . .

But those who ride the night winds must learn to love the stars . . . those who live on the edge must get used to the cuts . . . We are told if we live in glass houses to neither throw nor stow the stones . . . We are warned of bric-a-brac that easily breaks . . . IF YOU BREAK IT YOU BOUGHT IT . . . the store sign says . . . science being such a tenuous commodity we can only half believe for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction . . . But if Newton was as correct about apples as the snake we are at the beginning not the end . . . Those who have nothing to offer take something away...Don't cry for John Lennon cry for ourselves . . . He was an astronaut of inner space . . . He celebrated happiness \dots soothed the lonely \dots braced the weary \dots gave word to the deaf . . . vision to the insensitive . . . sang a long low note when he reached the edge of this universe and saw the Blackness...Poetry...like photography...functions best not only in the available light but in the timeliness of the subject . . . There are always those painters who think the only proper subjects are those who can rent the galleries . . . Others know we who cut stone must envision cathedrals . . . I don't believe you know someone just because you like what they do for a living . . . or the product of it . . . You don't feel you know David Rockefeller and you all like money . . . or what it can buy . . . You don't feel you know or want to know Jerry Falwell and you all want to go to heaven . . . or so you say . . . No this is not about John Lennon . . . He only wrote and sang some songs . . . So did Chuck Willis . . . Johnny Ace . . . Sam Cooke . . . Otis Redding . . . The blood on city streets and backcountry roads isn't new . . . but now we can call this game exactly what it is . . . This isn't about somebody who killed . . . either . . . It's always a nut though isn't it . . . cashew . . . peanut . . . walnut . . . pistachio . . . yeah . . . a real pissedaschio nut . . . But take comfort music lovers . . . Reagan supports gun control . . . ling freaks . . . And those who ride the night winds do learn to love the stars . . . even while crying in the darkness . . . The whole may be greater than the sum of its parts . . . we'll never know now . . . one part is missing. No this is not about John Lennon . . . It's about us . . . And the night winds . . . Anybody want a ticket to ride?

Mirrors

(for Billie Jean King)

The face in the window . . . is not the face in the mirror . . . Mirrors aren't for windows . . . they would block the light . . . Mirrors are for bedroom walls . . . or closet doors . . . Windows show who we hope to be . . . Mirrors reflect who we are . . . Mirrors . . . like religious fervors . . . are private . . . and actually uninteresting to those not involved . . . Windows open up . . . bring a fresh view . . . windows make us vulnerable

The French teach us in love . . . there is always one who kisses . . . and one who offers . . . the cheek . . . There is many a slip . . . 'twixt the cup and the lip . . . that's the reason . . . napkins were born . . . In love . . . there is always the hurt . . . and the hurter . . . even when the hurter doesn't want . . . to hurt . . . the hurtee selfishly strikes

Lips . . . like brownish gray gulls infested by contact with polluted waters circling a new jersey garbage heap . . . flap in anticipation

Lips...like an old pot-bellied unshaven voyeur with the grease of his speciality packed under his dirty ragged fingernails...move with the glee of getting a good lick in

Lips . . . like a blind man describing an elephant by touch . . . give inadequate information

There are things . . . that we know . . . yet don't want to see . . . NOT THINGS . . . like abused children . . . that is public pain . . . and light must be focused . . . to bring the healing heat . . . NOT THINGS . . . like battered wives . . . that is public policy . . . if we allow silence to cover the cries . . . NOR THINGS . . . like the emotionally troubled . . . only Dick and Jane . . . or Ozzie and Harriet . . . are always smiling . . . NOT THINGS . . . like people in wheelchairs . . . who need sidewalk access . . . NOR THINGS . . . like the unsighted . . . who need braille in public elevators . . .

BUT THINGS...like love...and promises made after midnight...the rituals and responsibilities of courtship...have no place...in the court yard...are not a part of the public see... Pillow Talk is only a movie starring Doris Day or a song by Sylvia...something delightful if you're lucky...or necessary if you're needy...but always private...since you're human

The hands of children break...drinking glasses...dinner plates...wooden buses...dolls with long blond hair...Lego structures...down...While playing blind man's bluff...flower heads and beds suffer little gym-toed carelessness...When playing kickball...baseball...football...soccer...windows unshuttered shatter...it's only natural...they are children...Childish adults want to break mirrors...want to shatter lives...While eating and playing paraphernalia are easily replaced...toys forgotten...flowers regrown...windows quickly repaired...sometimes with a scolding/sometimes with a shrug...mirrors broken...promise seven years...bad luck...Like Humpty Dumpty...lives...once exposed to great heights...seem destined...for great falls...and are seldom properly repaired

Some people choose heroes . . . because they kiss a horse . . . and ride . . . alone . . . into the sunset . . . Some choose a hero . . . because he robbed the rich . . . and gave to the poor . . . Some want to emulate lives . . . that discovered cures for exotic diseases . . . or made a lot of money off foolish endeavors . . . One of my heroes . . . is a tennis player . . . who has the courage of her game . . . and her life . . . "It Was A Mistake" for sure . . . if courtship turns to courts . . . if letters written to share a feeling come back . . . to testify against you . . . "It Was A Mistake" to choose the myopic . . . selfish . . . greedy as a repository of a feeling . . "It Was A Mistake" to want that which does not want you but what you can do . . . but It Cannot Be A Mistake to have cared . . . It Cannot Be An Error to have tried . . . It Cannot Be Incorrect to have loved

It is illogical to spit . . . upon a face you once kissed It is mean . . . to blacken eyes . . . which once beheld you It is wrong . . . to punish the best . . . within

One of my heroes embraced ... Medusa ... but the mirror will not break ... it only shattered ... The window did not crack ... it only opened ... I am not ashamed ... only sad ... not for my hero ... but for those who fail to see ... the true championship ... match

Linkage *

(for Phillis Wheatley)

What would a little girl think...boarding a big...at least to her...ship...setting sail on a big...to everybody... ocean...Perhaps seeing her first...iceberg...or whale...or shark...Watching the blue water kiss...the blue sky...and blow white clouds...to the horizon...My mother...caused awe...in me for blowing...smoke rings...What would a little girl think...leaving Senegal...for that which had no name... and when one was obtained...no place for her...

You see them now . . . though they were always . . . there . . . the children of Hester Prynne . . . walking the streets . . . needing a place . . . to eat . . . sleep . . . Be . . . warm . . . loved . . . alone . . . together . . . complete . . . The block . . . that little Black girls . . . stood upon . . . is the same block . . . they now walk . . . with little white boys and girls . . . selling themselves . . . to the adequate . . . bidder . . .

Hagar was a little Black girl . . . chosen by Sarah and Abraham . . . looked like a breeder . . . they said . . . Phillis . . . a little Black girl . . . chosen by Wheatley . . . looked intelligent . . . make a cute pet . . . for the children . . . Old men . . . sweat curling round their collars . . . choose a body and act . . . on the wait . . . through the tunnel to Jersey . . . Looked like fun . . . they say . . . Family members . . . and family friends . . . inhale to intoxication . . . the allure of the youths . . . destroying in conception . . . that which has never been . . . born . . .

Eyes . . . they say . . . are the mirror . . . of the soul . . . a reflection . . . of the spirit . . . an informer . . . to reality . . . What do you see . . . if you are a little Black girl . . . standing on a stage . . . waiting to be purchased . . . Is there kindness . . . concern . . . compassion . . . in the faces examining you . . . Do your eyes show . . . or other eyes acknowledge . . . that you . . . dusky . . .

naked of clothes and tongue...stripped of the protection of Gods...and countrymen...are Human...Do you see those who purchase...or those who sold...Do you see those who grab at you...or those who refused to shield you...Are you grateful to be bought...or sold...What would you think...of a people...who allowed...nay encouraged...abetted...regaled...in your chains...Hands...that handle heavy objects...develop callouses...Feet in shoes too tight...develop corns...Minds that cannot comprehend...like lovers separated too long...develop an affinity for what is...and an indifference...if not hostility...to that which has been denied...Little white boys...stalking Park Avenue...little white girls...on the Minnesota Strip...are also slaves...to the uncaring...of a nation...

It cannot be unusual...that the gene remembers...It divides . . . and redivides . . . and subdivides . . . again and again and again . . . to make the eyes brown . . . the fingers long . . . the hair coarse . . . the nose broad . . . the pigment Black . . . the mind intelligent . . . It cannot be unusual . . . that one gene . . . from all the billions upon billions . . . remembered clitorectomies . . . infibulations . . . women beaten . . . children hungry . . . garbage heaping...open sewers...men laughing...at it all . . . It cannot be unusual . . . that the dark . . . dusky . . . murky world . . . of druggery . . . drums . . . witch doctors . . . incantations . . . MAGIC . . . was willingly shed . . . for the Enlightenment . . . At least man . . . was considered rational . . . At least books . . . dispensed knowledge . . . At least God . . . though still angry and jealous . . . was reachable through prayer and action . . . if those are not redundant . . . terms . . . We cannot be surprised that young Phillis chose poetry . . . as others choose prostitution . . . to express her dismay . . .

The critics . . . from a safe seat in the balcony . . . disdain her performance . . . reject her reality . . . ignore her truths . . . How could she . . . they ask . . . thank God she was brought . . . and

bought . . . in this Land . . . How dare she . . . they decried . . . cheer George Washington his victory . . . Why couldn't she . . . they want to know...be more like...more like...more like . . . The record sticks . . . Phillis was her own precedent . . . her own image . . . her only ancestor . . . She wasn't like Harriet Tubman because she is Tubman . . . with Pen . . . rather than body . . . Leading herself . . . and therefore her people . . . from bondage . . . not like Sojourner Truth . . . she was Truth . . . using words on paper . . . to make the case . . . that slavery is people . . . and wrong to do . . . We know nothing of the Life . . . we who judge others . . . of the conditions . . . we create . . . and expect others to live with . . . or beyond . . . broken spirits . . . broken hearts . . . misplaced love . . . fruitless endeavor . . . Women . . . are considered complete . . . when they marry . . . We have done . . . it is considered . . . our duty . . . when we safely deliver a person from the bondage of Father . . . to the bondage of duty . . . and husband . . . from house slaves who read and write . . . to housewives who have time for neither . . . We are happy . . . when their own race is chosen . . . their own class reaffirmed . . . their own desire submerged . . . into food . . . dishes . . . laundry . . . babies . . . no dreams this week thank you I haven't the time . . . Like overripe fruit in an orchard embraced by frost . . . the will to live turns rotten . . . feckless . . . feculent . . .

What is a woman...to think...when all she hears...are words that exclude her...all she feels...are emotions that deceive...What do the children think...in their evening quest...of those who from platform and pulpit...deride their condition...yet purchase their service...What must life be... to any young captive...of its time...Do we send them back... home to the remembered horrors...Do we allow them their elsewheres...to parade their talents...Do we pretend that all is well...that Ends...

Charles White

The art of Charles White is like making love in the early evening after the cabs have stopped to pick you up and the doorman said "Good evening ma'am. Pleasant weather we're having"

The images of Charles White remind me of eating cotton candy at the zoo on a rainy day and the candy not melting and all the other kids wondering why

I remember once when I was little before I smoked too many cigarettes entering the church picnic sack race I never expected to win just thought it would be fun I came in second and drank at least a gallon of lemonade then wandered off to an old rope swing

Of all the losses of modern life the swing in the back yard is my special regret one dreams going back and forth of time and space stopping bowing to one's sheer magnificence pumping higher and higher space blurs time and the world stops spinning while I in my swing give a curtsey correctly my pigtails in place and my bangs cut just right

"But why aren't the artists the politicians" she asked "because they're too nice" was the reply "too logical too compassionate" which not understanding I took to mean "sexy"—at least

that's how come and passionate were used in the novels Johnetta and I used to sneak and read

And in the grown up world I think I understand that passion is politics that being is beauty and we are all in some measure responsible for the life we live and the world we live in

Some of us take the air, the land, the sun and misuse our spirits others of us have earned our right to be called men and women

Charles White and his art were introduced to me through magazines and books—that's why I love them

Charles White and his art were shared with me through love and concern—that's why I value those

Charles White and his art live in my heart and the heart of our people—that's why I think love is worthwhile

The Drum

(for Martin Luther King, Jr.)

The drums . . . Pa-Rum . . . the rat-tat-tat . . . of drums . . . The Pied Piper . . . after leading the rats . . . to death . . . took the children . . . to dreams . . . Pa-Rum Pa-Rum . . .

The big bass drums . . . the kettles roar . . . the sound of animal flesh . . . resounding against the wood . . . Pa-Rum Pa-Rum . . .

Kunta Kinte was making a drum . . . when he was captured . . . Pa-Rum . . .

Thoreau listened . . . to a different drum . . . rat-tat-tat-Pa-Rum . . .

King said just say . . . I was a Drum Major . . . for peace . . . Pa-Rum Pa-Rum . . . rat-tat-tat Pa-Rum . . .

Drums of triumph . . . Drums of pain . . . Drums of life . . . Funeral drums . . . Marching drums . . . Drums that call . . . Pa-Rum Pa-Rum . . . the Drums that call . . . rat-tat-tat-tat . . . the Drums are calling . . . Pa-Rum Pa-Rum . . . rat-tat-tat Pa-Rum . . .

A Poem on the Assassination ■ of Robert F. Kennedy

Trees are never felled . . . in summer . . . Not when the fruit . . . is yet to be borne . . . Never before the promise . . . is fulfilled. . . Not when their cooling shade . . . has yet to comfort . . .

Yet there are those . . . unheeding of nature . . . indifferent to ecology . . . ignorant of need . . . who . . . with ax and sharpened saw . . . would . . . in boots . . . step forth damaging . . .

Not the tree . . . for it falls . . . But those who would . . . in summer's heat . . . or winter's cold . . . contemplate . . . the beauty . . .

Eagles :

(a poem for Lisa)

```
Eagles are a majestic species . . . living in the thin searing air . . .
building
nests on precipitous ledges . . .
    they are endangered . . . but unafraid . . .
An eagle's nest is an inverted dimple . . . made of ready smiles . . .
unbleached
saris . . . available arms . . . and clean soap smells . . .
    to withstand all . . . elements . . .
Nestled in the chocolate chaos . . . destined to become:
         roller skaters
         submarine eaters
         telephone talkers
         people
    are improperly imprinted ducklings . . .
Eagles perched . . . on those precipitous ledges . . . insist upon
teaching . . .
    the young . . . to fly . . .
```

Flying Underground **

(for the children of Atlanta)

Every time the earth moves . . . it's me . . . and all my friends . . . flying underground . . . Off to a soccer game . . . or basketball showdown . . . sometimes stickball . . . baseball . . . wicket . . . Sweat falls from clouds . . . crowded 'neath the sun . . . cheering us . . . Sweat climbs up . . . to morning grass . . . when we run too fast . . . Always running . . . always fun . . . flying underground . . . I can make the earth move . . . flying underground . . .

I work . . . Saturday afternoons . . . and sometimes after school . . . Going to the store . . . for Mrs. Millie Worthington . . . Everybody knows her . . . with her legs swollen . . . 'bout to burst . . . Most times Chink . . . Mr. Chink Mama says . . . but everybody calls him Chink . . . gives me a dime . . . to get his snuff . . . or some chewing tobacco . . . Always go to Hunter Street . . . or to the Coliseum . . . when a show's in town . . . Do groceries . . . bags . . . peanuts/popcorn/ice cold pop! . . . Never gonna do dope . . . but maybe run a number . . . Walking . . . running . . . I get tired . . . Been cold . . . but not too much . . . Never been . . . really hungry . . . Just get tired . . . a lot . . .

Teacher says I do . . . real good . . . in school . . . I like to read books . . . where things happen . . . if I was Tom . . . Sawyer I'd get that fence . . . painted . . . I draw pictures . . . with lots of sun and clouds . . . Like to play I do . . . a lot . . . and I talk . . . in class . . .

I cried once ... I don't know why ... I can't remember now ... Mrs. Evans held my hand ... Nothing holds me now ... They opened up a spot ... and put me underground ... Don't cry Mama ... look for me ... I'm flying ...

Her Cruising Car

A Portrait of Two Small Town Girls

There is nothing . . . that can be said . . . that can frighten me . . . anymore . . . Sadden me . . . perhaps . . . disgust me . . . certainly . . . but not make me afraid . . . It has been said . . . Learn What You Fear . . . Then Make Love To It . . . dance with it . . . put it on your dresser . . . and kiss it good . . . night . . . Say it . . . over and over . . . until in the darkest hour . . . from the deepest sleep . . . you can be awakened . . . to say Yes . . .

She never learned . . . no matter how often people tried . . . that it was hers . . . the fear and the Life . . . the glory of the gamble . . . It was her quarter . . . she had to pick the machine . . . She never understood . . . simple duty . . . knowing only to give all of herself . . . or none . . . There was no balance . . . to her triangle . . . though three points . . . are the strongest mathematical figures . . . no tingle . . . when struck . . . no joy . . . in her song . . . no comfort in her chair . . . war/always war . . . with whom she was . . . who she wanted to be . . . and what they wanted . . . of her . . .

One reason I think . . . I am qualified . . . to run the world . . . though my appointment is not imminent . . . is when I get . . . what I want . . . I am happy . . . It is surprising to me . . . how few people are . . . When they win . . . like Richard Nixon or John McEnroe . . . they are unhappy . . . when they lose . . . impossible . . . One reason I think . . . I have neither ulcers nor nail biting habits . . . is I know to be careful . . . of what I want . . . I just may get it . . .

She was never taught . . . that everything is earned . . . that Newton was right . . . for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction . . . Interest is obtained . . . only on Savings . . . Personality is developed . . . only on risk . . . What is sought . . . must first

be given...We please others...by only allowing them access... to that part of ourselves which is public... If familiarity breeds contempt... use breeds hatred...

Turtles . . . the kind you find in pet stores . . . the kind Darwin met on Galápagos . . . grow to fit the environment . . . There are . . . probably . . . some genetic limits . . . but a small turtle . . . in a small bowl . . . will not outgrow . . . her home . . . Flowers . . . will rise . . . proportionate more to the size . . . of the pot . . . than the relationship of sun . . . to rain . . . Humans seldom deviate . . . If she hadn't been a small town girl . . . with a mind and heart molded absolutely . . . to fit the environment . . . she might have developed . . . a real skill . . . a real desire . . . to discover herself . . . and her gifts . . . As it was . . . as it is . . . she simply got used . . . and used to using . . .

She was never a loner...never made...to understand that life . . . in fact . . . is a solitary journey . . . that only one . . . was going to St. Ives . . . that no one held her bag . . . while the old woman traveled to Skookum . . . that the Little Red Hen and the Engine That Could . . . did it themselves . . . She was . . . let's face it . . . the leader of the pack . . . the top of the heap . . . cheerleader extraordinaire . . . She was very popular . . . sought after by all the right people . . . for her jokes . . . her parties . . . her parents' car . . . The telephone was invented . . . just for her . . . She set up the friendships...the going steadys...the class officers . . . yearbook staff . . . Who's-In-Who's-Out . . . through the witch wire ... Nothing could happen ... without her input . . . She actually thought . . . it was important . . . who went with whom . . . to the junior prom . . . But somebody had to pick up the fallen streamers . . . sweep the now scarred dance floor . . . turn out the lights before they could go home . . .

We were born ... in the same year ... our mothers delivered ... by the same doctor ... of the same city ... in the same hospital ... We were little chubby girls in pink ... passing cigarettes at

the lawn parties . . . My mother made me play . . . with her . . . and hers . . . with me . . . We didn't really mind . . . we shared the same friends . . . hers . . . and the same ideas . . . mine . . . Maybe I became . . . too accustomed . . . to the sameness . . . It was certainly easier . . . for me to shed . . . her friends . . . than she to shed . . . my notions . . . Our mothers belonged . . . to the same clubs . . . Our fathers tracked . . . the same night devils . . . They all had the same expectations . . . from . . . of . . . at . . . or to . . . us . . . I liked to brood . . . she didn't . . . She liked to laugh . . . I didn't . . . I thought I was ugly . . . she didn't . . .

Pots are taught not to call kettles Black . . . people who live in glass houses . . . don't throw stones . . . small town girls learn early . . . or not at all . . . that they can make a life . . . or abort the promise . . . One of us tried . . . one of us didn't have to . . . To each . . . according to her birth . . . from each according to her ability . . . Which is bastardized Marx . . . but legitimate bourgeoisie . . . She was never caring . . . She never learned to see . . . beyond her own windshield . . . that there were other people on the sidewalk . . . other cars . . . on the road . . . She drank . . . too much . . . for too long . . . Maybe in the back of her mind . . . or heart . . . or closet . . . there was a sign saying: There-Is-More-Than-This . . . but she wouldn't pull it out . . . put it up . . . or even acknowledge that some things . . . many things . . . were missing . . . I accept . . . if not embrace . . . the pain . . . the sign on my car says: I Brake For Gnomes . . . the one in my heart reads: Error In Process—Please Send Chocolate . . .

Into the rising sun . . . or setting years . . . accustomed to the scattered friends littering the road . . . she drives on . . . with the confidence of small town drivers who know every wayfall . . . toward the smaller minds . . . around the once hopeful lovers . . . into the illusion of what it is . . . to be a woman . . . through the delusion that trip necessitates . . . never once slowing . . . to ask Did I Hurt You . . . May I Love You . . . Can I/May I Please Give . . . You A Lift . . . With the surety . . . of one who never had to walk . . . she

accelerates . . . toward boredom . . . secure in the understanding . . . that everybody knows her . . . and would be unlikely to ticket . . . her cruising car . . . She was my friend . . . more than a sister . . . really . . . a part of the mirror . . . against which I adjust . . . my makeup . . . I have no directions . . . but here is a sign . . . Thomas Wolfe was wrong . . . Maybe it will be read . . .

The Cyclops in the Ocean

Moving slowly...against time...patiently majestic...the cyclops...in the ocean...meets no Ulysses...

Through the night...he sighs...throbbing against the shore...declaring...for the adventure...

A wall of gray...gathered by a slow touch...slash and slither...through the waiting screens...separating into nodules...making my panes...accept the touch...

Not content...to watch my frightened gaze...he clamors beneath the sash...dancing on my sill...

Certain to die . . . when the sun . . . returns . . .

(for Rosa Parks)

There is an old story...I learned in church...one evening...about a preacher...and his deacon...fishing...

It seems that every time... the good brother got a bite... the fish would scamper...away...and the deacon...would curse... The preacher...probably feeling... his profession demanded...a response...said to the deacon Brother... should you curse like that...with me here...over some fish...And the deacon agreed... They fished on... the deacon losing more fish...when finally a big big one... got away... The deacon remembered his vow...looked at his empty pole... reminded himself of the vow...looked at his empty pole... sucked in his breath... turned to the preacher... and remarked Reverend... Something Needs To Be Said...

I guess everybody wants . . . to be special . . . and pretty . . . the boys . . . just want to be strong . . . or fast . . . all the same things . . . children want . . . everywhere . . . It was ordinary . . . as far as I can see . . . my childhood . . . but . . . well . . . I don't know . . much . . . about psychology . . . We had a lot of pride . . . growing up . . . in Tuskegee . . . You could easily see . . . what our people could do . . . if somebody set a mind . . . to it . . . Father was a carpenter . . . Mama taught school . . . I got married . . . at nineteen . . .

You always felt...you should do something...It just wasn't right...what they did to Negroes...and why Negroes...let it happen...Colored people couldn't vote...couldn't use the bathroom in public places...couldn't go to the same library they paid taxes for...had to sit on the back of the buses...couldn't live places...work places...go to movies...amusement parks...Nothing...if you were colored...Just signs...always signs...saying No...No...No...

My husband is a fine man...a fighting man...When we were young...belonging to the N double A C P was radical... dangerous...People got killed...run out of town...beaten and burned out...just for belonging...My husband belonged...and I belonged...In 1943...during the war...Double Victory was just as important...one thing without the other was not good...enough...I was elected Secretary...of the Montgomery branch...I am proud...of that...Many people just think History...just fell on my shoulders...or at my feet...1 december 1955...but that's not true...

Sometimes it seemed it was never going . . . to stop . . . That same driver . . . who had me arrested . . . had put me off a bus . . . from Maxwell Air Base . . . where I had worked . . . or maybe they all . . . look the same . . . I wasn't looking . . . for anything . . . That Colvin girl had been arrested . . . and nobody did anything . . . I didn't think . . . they would do anything . . . when the driver told us . . . it was four of us . . . to move . . . Three people moved . . . I didn't . . . I couldn't . . . it was just so . . . wrong . . . Nobody offered to go . . . with me . . . A neighbor . . . on the same bus . . . didn't even tell . . . my husband . . . what had happened . . . I just thought . . . we should let them know . . . I should let them know . . . it wasn't right . . . You have to realize . . . I was forty years old . . . all my life . . . all I'd seen . . . were signs . . . that everything was getting worse . . .

The press people came ... around after ... we won ... I had to reenact ... everything ... I was on the aisle ... the man by the window ... got up ... I don't fault him ... for getting up ... he was just doing ... what he was told ... Across the aisle were two women ... they got up ... too ... There was a lot of violence ... physical and verbal ... I kinda thought ... something might happen ... to me ... I just didn't ... couldn't ... get up ...

They always tell us one . . . person doesn't make any difference . . . but it seems to me . . . something . . . should be done . . . In all

these years . . . it's strange . . . but maybe not . . . nobody asks . . . about my life . . . If I have children . . . why I moved to Detroit . . . what I think . . . about what we tried . . . to do . . . somehow you want to say things . . . are better . . . somehow . . . they are . . . not in many ways . . . People . . . older people . . . are afraid . . . younger people . . . are too . . . I really don't know . . . where it will end . . . Our people . . . can break . . . your heart . . . so can other . . . people . . . I just think . . . it makes a difference . . . what one person does . . . young people forget that . . . what one person does . . . makes a difference . . .

The deacon . . . of course . . . wanted to curse . . . because the fish got . . . away . . . perhaps there is something . . . other to be done . . . about the people we lose . . . We always talk . . . about how everyone was Black . . . before it was fashionable . . . overlooking the reality . . . that were that true . . . Black would have been fashionable . . . before it was . . . and might have stayed in vogue . . . longer than it did . . . Something needs to be said . . . about Rosa Parks . . . other than her feet . . . were tired . . . Lots of people . . . on that bus . . . and many before . . . and since . . . had tired feet . . . lots of people . . . still do . . . they just don't know . . . where to plant them . . .

Reflections/On a Golden Anniversary

You never know...when you meet... Is it at introduction... with polite handshakes and an exchange of names... Or is it with eyes... that ask can you... will you... maybe... love me

It seems sometimes that I always wanted . . . to be grown . . . and warm . . . and free . . . and loved . . . yet you never know . . . until it stops . . . that you were . . . Until the dolls . . . that some called children . . . had children . . . you think of as dolls . . . and you remember Yes . . . maybe I was grown . . . up perhaps . . . wider for sure . . . more patient . . . less tolerant . . . who knows what . . . exactly . . . until it stops

Love is more than stopping that ache . . . It's paying those bills . . . cooking that food . . . cleaning this house . . . answering when someone says Mama . . . and hoping it's a child . . . who calls

Did we meet when we were only a dream . . . of each other . . . Or did we meet with the cries . . . of labor . . . or fever . . . or no work this week

Do we know...because of the change of names...each other...Or do we know...because of an exchange of glances...that each is a bridge...free standing...stretched between the good years and the bad

It's hard to remember . . . when we met . . . I am constantly being introduced . . . to a you . . . I never knew . . . I offer you the same . . .

Hello

Love: Is a Human Condition **

An amoeba is lucky it's so small . . . else its narcissism would lead to war . . . since self-love seems so frequently to lead to self-righteousness . . .

I suppose a case could be made . . . that there are more amoebas than people . . . that they comprise the physical majority . . . and therefore the moral right . . . But luckily amoebas rarely make television appeals to higher Gods . . . and baser instincts . . . so one must ask if the ability to reproduce oneself efficiently has anything to do with love . . .

The night loves the stars as they play about the Darkness . . . the day loves the light caressing the sun . . . We love . . . those who do . . . because we live in a world requiring light and Darkness . . . partnership and solitude . . . sameness and difference . . . the familiar and the unknown . . . We love because it's the only true adventure . . .

I'm glad I'm not an amoeba . . . there must be more to all our lives than ourselves . . . and our ability to do more of the same . . .

Sky Diving

I hang on the edge of this universe singing off-key talking too loud embracing myself to cushion the fall

I shall tumble
into deep space
never in this form
or with this feeling
to return to earth

It is not tragic

I will spiral
through that Black hole
losing skin limbs
internal organs
searing
my naked soul

Landing in the next galaxy with only my essence embracing myself

as

I dream of you

A Journey

It's a journey...that I propose...I am not the guide...nor technical assistant...I will be your fellow passenger...

Though the rail has been ridden...winter clouds cover... autumn's exuberant quilt...we must provide our own guideposts...

I have heard . . . from previous visitors . . . the road washes out sometimes . . . and passengers are compelled . . . to continue groping . . . or turn back . . . I am not afraid . . .

I am not afraid . . . of rough spots . . . or lonely times . . . I don't fear . . . the success of this endeavor . . . I am Ra . . . in a space . . . not to be discovered . . . but invented . . .

I promise you nothing . . . I accept your promise . . . of the same we are simply riding . . . a wave . . . that may carry . . . or crash . . .

It's a journey . . . and I want . . . to go . . .

Resignation *

I love you

because the Earth turns round the sun
because the North wind blows north
sometimes
because the Pope is Catholic
and most Rabbis Jewish
because winters flow into springs
and the air clears after a storm
because only my love for you
despite the charms of gravity
keeps me from falling off this Earth
into another dimension

I love you

because it is the natural order of things

I love you

like the habit I picked up in college of sleeping through lectures or saying I'm sorry when I get stopped for speeding because I drink a glass of water in the morning and chain-smoke cigarettes all through the day because I take my coffee Black and my milk with chocolate because you keep my feet warm though my life a mess

I love you

because I don't want it any other way

I am helpless in my love for you

It makes me so happy

to hear you call my name

I am amazed you can resist

locking me in an echo chamber where your voice reverberates through the four walls

through the four walls

sending me into spasmatic ecstasy

I love you

because it's been so good for so long that if I didn't love you I'd have to be born again

and that is not a theological statement

I am pitiful in my love for you

The Dells tell me Love

is so simple

the thought though of you

sends indescribably delicious multitudinous

thrills throughout and through-in my body

I love you

because no two snowflakes are alike

and it is possible

if you stand tippy-toe

to walk between the raindrops

I love you

because I am afraid of the dark

and can't sleep in the light

because I rub my eyes

when I wake up in the morning

and find you there

because you with all your magic powers were determined that

I should love you

because there was nothing for you but that

I would love you

I love you

because you made me want to love you

more than I love my privacy

my freedom my commitments

and responsibilities

I love you 'cause I changed my life

to love you

because you saw me one friday $\,$

afternoon and decided that I would

love you

I love you I love you

I Wrote a Good Omelet

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I wrote a good omelet . . . and ate a hot poem . . . after loving you

Buttoned my car . . . and drove my coat home . . . in the rain . . . after loving you

I goed on red . . . and stopped on green . . . floating somewhere in between . . . being here and being there . . . after loving you

I rolled my bed . . . turned down my hair . . . slightly confused but . . . I don't care . . .

Laid out my teeth . . . and gargled my gown . . . then I stood . . . and laid me down . . . to sleep . . . after loving you
```

Three/Quarters Time

Dance with me \dots dance with me \dots we are the song \dots we are the music \dots Dance with me \dots

Waltz me . . . twirl me . . . do-si-do please . . . peppermint twist me . . . philly Squeeze

Cha cha cha . . . tango . . . two step too . . . Cakewalk . . . charleston . . . bougaloo . . .

Dance with me . . . dance with me . . . all night long . . . We are the music . . . we are the song . . .

Cancers M

(not necessarily a love poem)

```
Cancers are a serious condition . . . attacking internal organs
  . . . eating
them away . . . or clumping lumps . . . together . . .
The blood vessels carry . . . cancerous cells . . . to all body parts
  . . . cruising
would be the term . . . but this is not necessarily a love poem . . .
Cancer is caused . . . by . . .
          the air we breathe
          the food we eat
          the water we drink
Indices are unusually high . . . in cities that have baseball teams
. . . or people . . .
          Coffee . . . milk . . . saccharine
          cigarettes . . . sun . . . and birth control
               devices . . .
are among the chief offenders . . .
          Monthly phenomena stopped . . . internally . . . will
               only lead . . .
          to shock syndrome . . .
What indeed . . . porcelana . . . does a woman . . . want . . .
Cancers are . . .
          the new plague
          the modern black death
          all that is unknown
               yet
I have a cancer . . . in my heart . . . I'm told . . . on
  knowledgeable authority . . .
it is not possible
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For the heart we have . . .

cardiac arrest . . . and outright attacks . . .

holes in valves . . . and valve stoppage . . .

constricted vessels . . . and nefarious air

bubbles . . .
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But then . . . my doctor never saw you . . . and doesn't believe . . . in the zodiac . . .

A Word for Me . . . Also ■

Vowels . . . are a part of the English language . . . There are five in the alphabet . . . though only one . . . between lovers . . .

My father...you must understand...was Human...My mother...a larva...and while I concede most Celestial Beings...have taken the bodies of the majority...I chose differently...No one understands me...at all...except the clouds...and grasses...and waters cresting...against the Heavens...

I just don't know . . . what to do . . . with myself . . . I have forgotten the names . . . I feared being called . . . I have rested the burdens . . . of my will . . . I inhale the illogic . . . of the moment . . . exuding inert emotions . . . I am still . . . beside you . . . happily confused . . .

Words...are the foundation of thought...Many people think they think...but cannot put it...into words...My grand-mother thought...she could drive a car...too...though she couldn't do Reverse...There is a word for me...also...

I Am She

(for Nancy)

I am she \dots making rainbows \dots in coffee cups \dots watching fish jump \dots after midnight \dots in my dreams \dots

On the stove...left front burner...is the stew...already chewed...certain to burn...as I dream...of waves...of nothingness...

Floating to shore . . . riding a low moon . . . on a slow cloud . . . I am she . . . who writes . . . the poems . . .

The Room With the Tapestry Rug ■

And when she was lonely . . . she would go into the room . . . where all who lived . . . knew her well . . .

Her hands would touch . . . her lips . . . silently moving . . . would punctuate the talk . . . with a smile . . . or a frown . . . an occasional "Oh My" . . .

If it was cold ... she would wrap herself ... in the natted blue sweater ... knitted by a grandmother ... so many years ago ... If warm ... the windows were opened ... to allow the wind ... to partake of their pleasure ...

Holidays were never sad . . . seasons in fact . . . unchanging . . . Family and friends . . . lovers and longings . . . rested . . . waited . . . never to betray . . . never to leave her . . .

Her books . . . her secret life . . . in the room with the tapestry rug . . .

Wild Flowers

We are like a field . . . of wild flowers . . . unpollinated . . . swaying against the wind . . .

Dew sparkling . . . buds bursting . . . we await the drying day . . . Let's not gain . . . the notice of the woman . . . with the large straw basket . . .

Autumn will come . . . anyway . . . Let us continue . . . our dance . . . beneath the sun . . .

Love Thoughts *

```
Planes fly patterns . . . rather than land . . . on icy runways . . .

I ran a pattern . . . around you . . .

Captains cut their engines . . . to passively ride storm waves . . .

You put me . . . on hold . . .

Only clear skies . . . and still waters . . .

Can support engines of displacement

Aretha said it best . . . in Lady Soul . . . Ain't No Way . . . (for me to love you) . . .

If you don't . . . let me . . .
```

You Were Gone

You were gone

like a fly lighting on that wall with a spider in the corner

You were gone

like last week's paycheck for this week's bills

You were gone

like the years between twenty-five and thirty as if somehow

You never existed and if it wouldn't be for the gray hairs I'd never know that

You had come

A Song for New-Ark

When I write I like to write . . . in total silence . . . Maybe total . . . silence . . . is not quite accurate . . . I like to listen to the notes breezing by my head . . . the grunting of the rainbow . . . as she bends . . . on her journey from Saturn . . . to harvest the melody . . .

There is no laughter... in the city... no joy... in the sheer delight... of living... City sounds... are the cracking of ice in glasses... or hearts in despair... The burglar alarms... or boredom... warning of illicit entry... The fire bells proclaiming... yet another home... or job... or dream... has deserted the will... to continue... The cries... of all the lonely people... for a drum... a tom-tom... some cymbal... some/body... to sing for...

I never saw old/jersey . . . or old/ark . . . Old/ark was a forest . . . felled for concrete . . . and asphalt . . . and bridges to Manhattan . . . Earth acres that once held families . . . of deer . . . fox . . . chipmunks . . . hawks . . . forest creatures . . . and their predators . . . now corral business . . . men and women . . . artists . . . and intellectuals . . . People . . . and their predators . . . under a banner of neon . . . graving the honest Black . . . cradling the stars above . . . and the earth below . . . turning to dust . . . white shirts . . . lace curtains at the front window . . . automobiles lovingly polished . . . Dreams . . . encountering racist resistance . . . New-Ark knows too much pain . . . sees too many people who aren't special . . . watches the buses daily . . . the churches on Sunday . . . the bars after midnight . . . disgorge the unyoung . . . unable . . . unqualified . . . unto the unaccepting . . . streets . . . I lived . . . one summer . . . in New-Ark . . . New-Jersey . . . on Belleville Avenue . . . Every evening . . . when the rats left the river . . . to visit the central ward . . . Anthony Imperiali . . . and his boys . . . would chunk bullets . . . at the fleeing mammals . . . refusing to recognize . . . the obvious ... family ... ties ... I napped ... to the rat-tattat . . . rat-tat-tat . . . wondering why . . . we have yet to learn . . . rat-tat-tats . . . don't even impress . . . rats . . .

When I write I want to write . . . in rhythm . . . regularizing the moontides . . . to the heart/beats . . . of the twinkling stars . . . sending an S.O.S. . . . to day trippers . . . urging them to turn back . . . toward the Darkness . . . to ride the night winds . . . to tomorrow . . I wish I understood . . . bird . . . Birds in the city talk . . . a city language . . . They always seem . . unlike humans . . . to have something . . . useful . . . to say . . Other birds . . . like Black americans . . . a century or so ago . . . answer back . . . with song . . . I wish I could be a melody . . like a damp . . . gray . . . feline fog . . . staccatoing . . . stealthily . . . over the city . . .

Occasional Poems

1991-1998

Poem of Angela Yvonne Davis

(October 16, 1970)

- i move on feeling and have learned to distrust those who don't
- i move in time and space determined by time and space feeling
- that all is natural and i am
- a part of it and "how could you?" they ask you had everything but the men who killed the children in birmingham aren't on the most wanted list and the men who killed schwerner, chaney
- and Goodman aren't on the most wanted list and the list of
- unlisted could and probably would include most of our "finest
- Leaders" who are WANTED in my estimation for at least serious
- questioning so we made a list and listed it
- "but you had everything," they said and i asked "quakers?" and i asked
- "jews?" and i asked "being sent from home?" my mother told me the world
- would one day speak my name then she recently suggested angela Yvonne
- why don't you take up sports like your brother and i sais "i don't run
- as well as he" but they told me over and over again "you can have them
- all at your feet" though i knew they were at my feet when i was born
- and the heavens opened up sending the same streak of lightning through
- my mother as through new york when i was arrested

- and i saw my sisters and brothers and i heard them tell the young
- racists "you can't march with us" and i thought i can't march at all
- and i looked at the woman whose face was kissed by night as she said
- "angela you shall be free" and i thought i won't be free even if i'm set
- loose, the game is set the tragedy written my part is captive
- i thought of betty shabazz and the voices who must have said "aren't you
- sort of glad it's over?" with that stupidity that fails to notice
- it will never be over for some of us and our children and our
- grandchildren. betty can no more forget that staccato than i the pain
- in jonathan's face or the love in george's letters. and i remember
- the letter where i asked "why do't you write Beverly axelrod and become
- rich and famous" and his complete reply

- i remember water and sky and paris and wanting someone to be mine
- a german? but the world is in love with germans so why not? though
- i being the youngest daughter of Africa and the sun was rejected
- and all the while them saying "isn't she beautiful?" and she being i
- thinking "aren't you sick" and i remember wanting to give myself but

- nothing being big enough to take me and searching for the right way
- to live and seeing the answer understanding the right way to die
- though death is as distasteful as the second cigarette in the morning
- and don't you understand? i value my life so surely all others must value
- theirs and that's the weakness the weak use against us. they so
- casually make decisions like who's going to live and who's going to
- starve to death and who will be happy or not and they never know
- what their life means since theirs lacks meaning and they never
- have to try to understand what someone else's life could mean those guards and policemen who so casually take the only possession
- worth possessing and dispense with it like an empty r.c. cola bottle
- never understanding the vitality of its contents
- and the white boys and girls came with their little erections and i
- learned to see but not show feeling and i learned to talk while not
- screaming though i would scream if anyone understands that language
- and i would reach if there were a substance and Black people say
- i went communist and i only and always thought i went and Black people
- say "why howard johnson's" but i could think of no other place and Black
- people ask "why didn't i shoot it out?" when i thought i

- had. and they say
- they have no responsibility and i knew they would not rest until my
- body was brought out in tiny flabby pieces
- the list is long and our basic Christianity teaches us to sacrifice
- the good to the evil and if the blood is type O positive maybe they
- will be satisfied but white people are like any other gods with an insatiable
- appetite and as long as we sacrifice our delicate to their coarse we will sacrifice
- i mean i started with a clear head cause i felt i should and feeling
- is much more than mere emotion though that is not to be sacrificed
- and through it all i was looking for this woman angela yvonne
- and i wanted to be harriet tubman who was the first WANTED Black woman
- and i wanted to bring myself and us out of the fear and into the Dark
- but my helpers trapped me and this i have learned of love—it is harder
- to be loved than to love and the responsibilities of letting yourself
- be loved are too great and perhaps i shall never love again cause i would rather need than allow, and what i'm saying is
- i had five hours of freedom when i recognized my lovers had decided
- and i was free in my mind to say—whatever you do you will not know
- what you have done

we walked that october afternoon among the lights and smells of autumn

people and i tried so to hold on. and as i turned 51st street and eighth

and saw, i knew there was nothing more to say so i thought and i entered the elevator touching the insides as a woman is touched

i looked into the carpet as we were expelled and entered the key which would both open and close me and i thought to them all to myself just make it easy on yourself

A Poem

for langston hughes

diamonds are mined . . . oil is discovered gold is found . . . but thoughts are uncovered

wool is sheared . . . silk is spun weaving is hard . . . but words are fun

highways span . . . bridges connect country roads ramble . . . but i suspect

if i took a rainbow ride i could be there by your side

metaphor has its point of view allusion and illusion . . . too

meter . . . verse . . . classical . . . free poems are what you do to me

let's look at this one more time since i've put this rap to rhyme

when i take my rainbow ride you'll be right there at my side

hey bop hey bop hey re re bop

But Since You Finally Asked

(A Poem Commemorating the 10th Anniversary of the Slave Memorial at Mount Vernon)

No one asked us . . . what we thought of Jamestown . . . in 1619 . . . they didn't even say . . . "Welcome" . . . "You're Home" . . . or even a pitiful . . . "I'm Sorry . . . But We Just Can't Make It . . . Without You" . . . No . . . No one said a word . . . They just snatched our drums . . . separated us by language and gender . . . and put us on blocks . . . where our beauty . . . like our dignity . . . was ignored

No one said a word . . . in 1776 . . . to us about Freedom . . . The rebels wouldn't pretend . . . the British lied . . . We kept to a space . . . where we owned our souls . . . since we understood . . . another century would pass . . . before we owned our bodies . . . But we raised our voices . . . in a mighty cry . . . to the Heavens above . . . for the strength to endure

No one says . . . "What I like about your people" . . . then ticks off the wonder of the wonderful things . . . we've given . . . Our song to God, Our strength to the Earth . . . Our unfailing belief in forgiveness . . . I know what I like about us . . . is that we let no one turn us around . . . not then . . . not now . . . we plant our feet . . . on higher ground . . . I like who we were . . . and who we are . . . and since someone has asked . . . let me say: I am proud to be a Black American . . . I am proud that my people labored honestly . . . with forbearance and dignity . . . I am proud that we believe . . . as no other people do . . . that all are equal in His sight . . . We didn't write a constitution . . . we live one . . . We didn't say "We the People" . . . we are one . . . We didn't have to add . . . as an after-thought . . . "Under God" . . . We turn our faces to the rising sun . . . knowing . . . a New Day . . . is always . . . beginning

Stardate Number 18628.190*

This is not a poem . . . this is hot chocolate at the beginning of Spring . . . topped with hand whipped double cream . . . a splash of brandy to give it sass . . . and just a little cinnamon to give it class . . . This is not a poem

This is a summer quilt . . . log cabin pattern . . . see the corner piece . . . that was grandmother's wedding dress . . . that was grandpappa's favorite Sunday tie . . . that white strip there . . . is the baby who died . . . Mommy had pneumonia so that red flannel shows the healing . . . This does not hang from museum walls . . . nor will it sell for thousands . . . This is here to keep me warm

This is not a sonnet . . . though it will sing . . . Precious Lord . . . take my hand . . . Amazing Grace . . . how sweet the sound . . . Go down, Moses . . . Way down to the past . . . Way up to the future . . . It will swell with the voice of Marian Anderson . . . lilt on the arias of Leontyne . . . dance on the trilling of Battle . . . do the dirty dirty with Bessie . . . moan with Dinah Washington . . . rock and roll through the Sixties . . . rap its way into the Nineties . . . and go on out into Space with Etta James saying At Last . . . No, this is not a sonnet . . . but the truth of the beauty that the only authentic voice of Planet Earth comes from the black soil . . . tilled and mined . . . by the Daughters of the Diaspora

This is a rocking chair . . . rock me gently in the bosom of Abraham . . . This is a bus seat: No, I'm not going to move today . . . This is a porch . . . where they sat spitting at fireflies . . . telling young Alex the story of The African . . . This is a hook rug . . . to cover a dirt floor . . . This is an iron pot . . . with the left over vegetables . . . making a slow cooking soup . . . This is pork . . . simmering chitterlings . . . surprising everybody with our ability to make a way . . . out of no way . . . This is not rest when we are weary . . . nor comfort when we are sad . . . It is laughter . . . when we are in pain . . . It is

"N'mind" when we are confused . . . It is "Keep climbing, chile" when the road takes the unfair turn . . . It is "Don't let nobody turn you round" . . . when our way is dark . . . It is the faith of our Mothers . . . who plaited our hair . . . put Vaseline on our faces . . . polished our run down shoes . . . patched our dresses . . . wore sweaters so that we could wear coats . . . who welcomed us and our children . . . when we were left alone to rear them . . . who said "Get your education . . . and nobody can put you back"

This is not a poem \dots No \dots It is a celebration of the road we have traveled \dots It is a prayer \dots for the roads yet to come \dots This is an explosion \dots The original Big Bang \dots that makes the world a hopeful \dots loving place

This is a flag...that we placed over Peter Salem and Peter Poor...the 54th Regiment from Massachusetts...All the men and women lynched in the name of rape...Emmett Till... Medgar Evers...Malcolm X...Martin Luther King, Jr....This a banner we fly for Respect...Dignity...the Assumption of Integrity...for a future generation to rally around

This is about us . . . Celebrating ourselves . . . And a well deserved honor it is . . . Light the candles, Essence . . . This is a rocket . . . Let's ride

Brother Brother Brother

(the Isley Brothers of Lincoln Heights)

You see ... I Know the Isley Brothers. Know where they come from. Know the high school they went to. Remember when they moved to Blue Ash. Knew their little brother Vernon who used to do a mad and wonderful itch. And who remembers the itch? But Vernon would stand on stage and reach around and swizzle his hips and the amateur night audience would be on their feet though Rudolph and O'Kelly were probably the beneficiaries of that energy but . . . you see . . . I know them

You see . . . We all come from Lincoln Heights which is an independent Black city just outside Cincinnati and we mostly say we are from Cincinnati because nobody knows Lincoln Heights but back in the old days when white people would periodically go crazy and need/want/have to kill somebody Black lots of Black people moved from the river front into the West End and when they could if they could out of the West End and into the Valley and in the Valley . . . you see . . . land was ten cents an acre which is not a lot today but from folks walking away from slavery and folks running from crazy folks who wanted to/needed to/were definitely going to/kill them ten cents meant the difference between life and death . . . But

You see . . . it's like everything else so Black folks moved way out there and the Erie Canal was suppose to go from Cleveland down what ultimately became I-75 to connect the Lake to the River and if that had happened instead of it not happening then all the Black folks who scraped together a nickel or so so that they could get a little piece of land would have had worthless condemned land but the canal did not happen though Lincoln Heights did

And then wars and stuff started happening and General Electric where progress is the most important product wanted to have a lot of land but they didn't want to have to pay for it so they split the

land and called it Evendale and what was left on the hill was Lincoln Heights and I'm sure I don't have to say which is Black and which is white but I bet you can guess . . . So

You see . . . The Valley Homes were built for folks to work in the GE plant not to mention folks needing some place to live and other folks not wanting to live near them though the Valley Homes were good enough for us which considering the alternative they were but that doesn't make it right but it was definitely O.K. because Lincoln Heights had great athletes who would have been famous if they had been allowed to go to desegregated schools so that Virgil Thompson went to West Virginia State but nobody much cared about talented boys from a small Black town that was incorporated and he came back

You see . . . we had singers too and Pookey Smith could really sing and everybody loved to hear him at Christmas or any other time but Pookey and his brother didn't have a mother like Mrs. Isley who was determined that her boys were going to get out not because she didn't like Lincoln Heights or even the Valley Homes but she knew if she could get them out then the talents they had would have a chance to grow and that's more or less when they moved to Blue Ash and Vernon was run over by a car and all of Lincoln Heights wanted to see them become rich and famous since we already knew they were talented and beautiful. But Ernie came along and we all were happy though nobody does the itch anymore since that's what Vernon did . . . And we all remembered.

You see . . . When they started perfecting SHOUT and Mrs. Isley said she was taking her boys to New York and Elaine said she was going with Rudolph and Ronald used to date my sister but she had to go on to college and the Isleys know because . . . you see . . . they are from Lincoln Heights that they had to take care of each other and they have done that . . . We all mourned when O'Kelly now called Kelly died because he was such a good friend to all of us and none of them ever forgot where they came from and how

much love all of Lincoln Heights still sends out to all of them and just recently

You See . . . I was home and it was Mother's Day at church and their Grandmother wanted to sing a tribute and she was still doing that Isley SHOUT at 92 and a lot of other people did that Isley SHOUT like the Beatles and Joey Dee and stuff but it was the Isley SHOUT that was our thing and other than the Beatles they have sold the most records . . . and Lincoln Heights

You see . . . Always knew they were special and that's why we know Brother Brother may be an album title but it is a way of life with these powerful, wonderful sons of Lincoln Heights who are Brother to us all . . . don'cha know



Afterword Some Poems Are More Useful Than Others

▼ y second visit to the African continent was at the invitation of the USIA. I was excited to return to Africa and this time I was taking my son and Debbie Russell, who had worked for me off and on since I had taught her at Livingston College, I was always teasing Debbie about having her passport which she had not had ready when Soul! took us to London to film the dialogue with James Baldwin. For sure, that was a different time because Debbie borrowed the passport of a friend under the auspices of "all colored people look alike." "But, Nikki," she said. "What if they know it's not me?" "Well, then," I comforted her, "you'll go to jail and we'll have to go to London without you." But I honestly didn't think they would care and they really never noticed the difference. When we got back my first question was: Going to get your passport? And she scurried on down to the main post office. When Africa came up she was ready. Her mother wasn't so sure, so she traveled over from Newark to have a talk with me. She wanted to be assured that I would bring Debbie back. "Whatever else would I do?", I wanted to know. But as it turned out her mother was quite prescient as I had not an inconsiderable number of good offers if I would let Debbie marry. If Debbie had played tennis she would remind you of Serena. Not that tall but that same African-American butt that is so interesting to people who are used to looking at flat behinds. Some just wanted to know if they could keep her overnight and others were more honorable. But I kept my vow to Mrs. Russell and not only brought Debbie back but made sure she was chaperoned while there. I got quite a few good gifts trying to win my favor but I definitely played hard ball. No. I have promised her mother.

In trying to get ready I put a big map of Africa up on the playroom wall. I colored in all the countries we were to visit. Since I am, shamefully, language poor I was only being invited to the English speaking countries: Ghana, Nigeria, Botswana, Lesotho. Swaziland, Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya. This was before you could travel directly to Africa so we had a stopover in Paris. Change planes and on to Liberia. Stop over briefly in Liberia then on to Ghana. Disembark in Ghana. Since I wanted Thomas to not only know the geography but where he was going we went over our routine and route many times. "What are we going to do to get to Africa?" I would innocently ask. "First we say 'Where is that Debbie? If she doesn't come right away we're going to leave her." Thomas would reply. "Then we go downstairs and I say: Taxi! Then we say Kennedy Airport." And I would cheer him on. "That's wonderful! What next?" "Then we get on the plane and go to sleep," he'd say. Then looking accusingly at me he would invariably add: "You always do." Which is true. Flying so petrifies me that if I don't go to sleep I fear I'd be screaming in the aisles. There were people who refused to fly after 9-11-01 but not me. Friends said to me after the events "Aren't you afraid to fly after all that's happened?" I had to say nothing has changed for me. I was afraid to fly way before anything like the unimaginable happened and I'm afraid now. I figure I'm lucky to have always been scared. Not only has nothing changed, I'm not angry with anyone because of my own fears. Sort of a different way of looking at fear but at least I can smile when I see brown people on the plane. "Mommy works hard," I explain which sounds a whole lot better than Mommy is scared shitless. "What happens next?" "We wake up in Paris! And we get good food." I've never been a fan of airplane or airport food. And after all those people got sick on United back in the 1970's I refuse to eat anything at all. Plus mostly I am asleep. I can sleep from coast to almost coast. If I wake up its usually within the hour of landing and I have been known to drink a Coke. But I try to lull myself back to dreamland because landing is as dangerous as takeoff and I really don't want to start screaming. "In Paris we change airports then off to Africa!" I am reward prone and at that he gets hugs and kisses. This is really good for a not quite first grader. "Where will we land?" "Mommy, we land in Monrovia, Liberia.

Named for President Monroe and started by slaves." I am so proud I could burst. "Do we get off the plane?" "No. We stay on until take-off. Then the plane flies to Ghana. We get off at Accra. Ghana was started by a nice man who went to school in the United States." Still pretty good for a kid. "And where do we go?" "To our hotel." I am so pleased. I think he really understands this visit and will get lots out of it.

The day comes and Debbie is on time. We go downstairs and Thomas hails the taxi. Out to the airport. On to the plane. A beautiful, sunny day in Paris. Out to the airport. On to Liberia, The plane lands and I ask my darling, precocious son "Where are we?" "Monrovia, Liberia named for President Monroe and founded by slaves!" I am telling myself what a great job I have done. People around us are smiling, so pleased are they at the young mother and her wonderfully informed son. The plane takes off and we are watching the green of Africa. We land in Ghana. Deplane. Head off for the hotel. Get checked in. Shower. And go down to have afternoon tea. We are sitting there on the terrace relaxing. Thomas is looking a bit puzzled. Then he pops the question: "Mommy, why are these people speaking Spanish?" My goodness! After all we have been through my son thinks he's somewhere in Spanish Harlem. Nevermind all the lessons. Nevermind all the recitations. He hasn't got a clue in the world where we are. My spirits fall. Debbie tries to reassure me. But I know. I have failed. All the people who said he is too young to go to Africa are right. All the people who said it was a waste of time and money, that he would never remember anything are right. All those people who told me I was wrong are right. My shoulders were down on my knees and my spirit was even lower. I recovered though. I told myself we are here and there's nothing else to be done. I explained they were not speaking Spanish but Twi. Thomas looked at me like I was playing a joke. We went on to my readings and our touring. We flew to Lagos, Nigeria where we had a wonderful visit. Everyone was very nice and everyone was especially nice to Thomas. There was an especial appreciation that I had brought my son with me because it seemed to indicate some level of trust.

We were on our way to the BLS countries, Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. The plane we were suppose to be on got commandeered by the military which happened a lot in those days so instead of our non-stop to Johannesburg we had to take what amounted to a local. The plane made a couple of stops then we took off for Zaire. As we were landing Thomas asked: "Where are we, now?" It had been a long day and we still had some hours flying before we reached the place where we would change planes "We're landing in Zaire, Thomas," I answered rather absentmindedly. "Where is that, Mommy? Where are we?" he demanded. It dawned on me that there was no way he could know Zaire which had recently changed its name. "Thomas, we're landing in the Congo," I explained. "The Congo!" he said excitedly. "Mommy you were born here! We must be in Africa." He was beaming. And so was I. I was never so happy that I had written a poem than I was at that very moment. "Yes, Thomas. We're in Africa. I was born in the Congo . . . "

> NIKKI GIOVANNI July 2003

Notes to the Poems

Black Feeling Black Talk

Black Feeling Black Talk was privately printed in 1968 and distributed by Giovanni herself. Because she feared rejection, as she stated in an interview published in *Ingenue* in February 1973, Giovanni did not submit the collection to a publisher; instead, with money borrowed from family and friends, she had it printed and distributed it herself: "I decided to take my poetry to the people, and if they rejected it, that would be that." In fact, some 2,000 copies of this volume were sold during its first year, an extraordinary figure for a privately printed *and* privately distributed book of poetry.

"Detroit Conference of Unity and Art (For HRB)"

The Detroit Conference of Unity and Art was held in late May 1967.

HRB:H. Rap Brown, now Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin (1943–). Civil Rights activist who became the chairman of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) after Stokely Carmichael left to join the Black Panthers. Al-Amin was recently convicted of killing a Fulton County (Georgia) sheriff's deputy and sentenced to life in prison. Giovanni considers the charges absurd. See the title poem of *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea*.

L. 15: "Malcolm": Malcolm X, later Al Hajj Malik Al-Shabazz (1925–65).

"On Hearing 'The Girl with the Flaxen Hair'"

"The Girl with the Flaxen Hair" (*La Fille aux cheveux de lin*) is a piano composition by Claude Debussy (1862–1918), published in 1910 in Book 1 of his *Préludes*.

This is a very early poem, dating to 1965; the second or third poem Giovanni wrote, it was rejected by *The Atlantic Monthly*.

"Poem (For TW)"

TW: Thelma Watson, Giovanni's French teacher at Fisk University. The teacher and her student often speculated about the possibility that they were kinswomen because Ms. Watson had the same family name as Giovanni's maternal grandparents.

"Poem (For BMC No. 1)"

BMC: Blanche McConnell Cowan was the dean of women at Fisk University when Giovanni returned there in 1964. Cowan purged the file on Giovanni that had been generated by the former dean, Ann Cheatam, and became an important friend and mentor both during Giovanni's years at Fisk and after. Cowan died in 1986.

- L. 6: "no sun from Venice": No Sun in Venice is a 1957 album released by the Modern Jazz Quartet.
- L. 7: "green cricket with a pink umbrella": Blanche Cowan was a member of the African American sorority Alpha Kappa Alpha, whose colors are green and pink.

"Our Detroit Conference (For Don L. Lee)"

Don L. Lee, now Haki R. Madhabuti (1942–), is a Chicago poet and founder of Third World Press who was an important leader in the Black Arts movement. Giovanni met him at the Detroit Conference of Unity and Art in May 1967.

L. 2: "Digest": The Negro Digest, which was relaunched in the 1960s by Johnson Publications. Under the editorship of Hoyt Fuller (1923–81), Negro Digest (renamed Black World in 1970) played a central role in helping shape the Black Arts movement. Both Giovanni and Lee were regular contributors.

"Poem (For Dudley Randall)"

Dudley Randall (1914–2000) was a poet and the founder of Broadside Press (1963), which published the work of many young poets of the Black Arts movement. Broadside distributed Giovanni's *Black Judgement* and published her *Re: Creation*.

"Poem (For BMC No. 2)"

BMC: Blanche McConnell Cowan; see note to "Poem (For BMC No. 1)."

- L. 7: "barefoot boy": An allusion to "Barefoot Boy with Cheeks of Tan" by John Greenleaf Whittier (1807–92).
- L. 8: "John Henry": John Henry was born a slave in the 1840s or 1850s. The legend that grew up around his work as a steel driver for the railroads during Reconstruction is expressed in the many versions of the song "John Henry, Steel Driving Man."
- L. 9: "camel with a cold nose": A reference to the folk story about a man whose camel begged to be allowed to stick just his cold nose in the tent at night; the next morning, of course, the entire camel was in the tent and the man was outside in the cold.

"Personae Poem (For Sylvia Henderson)"

Sylvia Henderson: In the summer of 1967, Giovanni organized Cincinnati's first Black Arts Festival, held in the West End, where she did volunteer social work. As a part of the festival, she adapted Virginia Hamilton's novel Zeely to the stage. Sylvia Henderson had the title role in the play, directed by Giovanni and performed at a synagogue in Avondale, a Cincinnati neighborhood. Giovanni selected the West End as the location for the three-day festival because she volunteered there, her mother was a social worker there, and her father had grown up and was widely respected there; Giovanni knew, in other words, that she could get widespread participation and support in the West End, at that time a neighborhood of project housing. The conservative director of the neighborhood YWCA was unwilling to let Giovanni and her colleagues use the Y's stage for the production. Many of the people with whom Giovanni worked also worked for or with a social work agency in Avondale called Seven Hills, and one of them offered the use of the synagogue's stage.

"Poem (For PCH)"

PCH: Perri Harper. The response to the Black Arts Festival and to Giovanni's production of *Zeely* (see preceding note) was over-

whelmingly positive. The success of the play demonstrated the potential for an ongoing black theater in Cincinnati. Giovanni suggested to Charles Sells, the director of Seven Hills (see preceding note), that he hire a director for the theater group she had organized. He agreed to do so if she could find someone. She contacted John Oliver Killens, with whom she had studied at Fisk, and he eventually recommended Perri Harper. Harper had worked for a number of years with small theaters in Greenwich Village, where she lived with the jazz pianist Bill Evans. Possibly because of problems in her relationship with Evans, Harper accepted the position in Cincinnati. Charles Holman, another social worker involved in the theater group, helped win grant money and donations, and Harper directed a series of plays; within three or four years, this group was incorporated into the Cincinnati Playhouse, which had previously had an all-white board of directors, all white actors, and all-white play selections.

Ll. 7 ff.: Perhaps an allusion to the fact that Harper, who had been hired through Giovanni's efforts, later refused to provide a letter of recommendation for her application to graduate school.

"Poem (For BMC No. 3)"

BMC: Blanche McConnell Cowan; see note to "Poem (For BMC No. 1)," page 370.

"A Historical Footnote to Consider Only When All Else Fails (For Barbara Crosby)"

Barbara Crosby: Several years older than Giovanni, Crosby was originally a friend of Gary Giovanni, the poet's sister. Crosby graduated from Cincinnati's prestigious Walnut Hills High School and Fisk University. She was active in the Civil Rights movement and was a member of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee). As a participant in the International Village Movement, she had also spent a good deal of time in Europe. She was a social worker with Seven Hills (see note to "Personae Poem," page 371), and she and Giovanni shared an apartment in Cincinnati during the summer of 1967.

"The True Import of Present Dialogue, Black vs. Negro (For Peppe, Who Will Ultimately Judge Our Efforts)"

"Black vs. Negro": Naming has always had enormous importance to Black Americans because of its connection to identity and power. Africans brought to this country and sold into slavery were stripped of their names and forced to take the names given them by their new masters. In the 1960s special attention was focused on this issue. Those involved in the Black Power and Black Arts movements drew significant distinctions between the terms "Negro," "nigger," and "Black." Sarah Webster Fabio wrote a definitive essay on this topic for Negro Digest, in which she offered the following analysis:

Scratch a Negro and you will find a nigger and a potential black man; scratch a black man and you may find a nigger and the remnants of a Negro. Negro is a psychological, sociological, and economical fabrication to justify the status quo in America. Nigger is the tension created by a black man's attempt to accommodate himself to become a Negro in order to survive in a racist country. Black is the selfhood and soul of anyone with one drop of black blood, in America, who does not deny himself.

The black community has always known—and it is becoming apparent to the world—that America wants Negroes and niggers but not black people.

James Baldwin makes reference to the observation that "the Negro-in-America is a form of insanity which overtakes white men." The Negro is a pathology: Baldwin has also said that there is "no Negro, finally, who has not had to make his own precarious adjustment to the 'nigger' who surrounds him and to the 'nigger' in himself." Being black, then, is a reaffirmation of selfhood; it is a meaningful antidote to white racism; it is a move toward deniggerizing the world population of non-white people and of humanizing the white people. ("Who Speaks Negro? What Is Black?" Negro Digest, Sept.—Oct. 1968.)

Peppe: Family nickname for Giovanni's nephew, Christopher Black (1959–).

L. 2: "Can you kill": Giovanni stated that she wrote this poem because "it bugged me to always hear talk of going out to die for our rights. . . . That's not the hardest thing to do. It's harder to go out and kill for your rights. I wrote the poem as a protest against that attitude" (Peter Bailey, "Nikki Giovanni: 'I Am Black, Female, Polite . . . '" Ebony, February 1972, p. 50).

"A Short Essay of Affirmation Explaining Why (With Apologies to the Federal Bureau of Investigation)"

This poem was written in July 1967, when Giovanni was living in Cincinnati. Often referred to as a "hot summer," the summer of 1967 witnessed race riots and racial disturbances across the country. The most serious occurred in Newark, New Jersey, and Detroit, Michigan, but there were outbreaks in dozens of other cities, including Cincinnati. Giovanni shared an apartment with Barbara Crosby (see note to "A Historical Footnote," page 372), who was as well-known to left-wingers in Cincinnati as Giovanni was to Black nationalists; as a consequence, their telephone was wire-tapped. Giovanni herself was at her parents' home in Lincoln Heights when the riot broke out in Cincinnati.

L. 1: "Honkies": white people.

L. 48: "Miss Hoover": A reference to the then director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, J. Edgar Hoover (1895–1972), whose abuse of his powers, especially in matters regarding Black people, has been widely documented.

"Poem (No Name No. 3)"

L. 3: "Anne Frank": Anne Frank (1929–45) gained international attention when her diaries were published after her death. Between 1942 and 1944, during World War II, when Jews were being rounded up and sent to "work camps," Anne Frank and her family hid in a secret annex of the building housing her father's business in Amsterdam. Anne wrote in her diary during these two years. In 1944 the family was arrested and deported; Anne eventu-

ally was sent to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, where she died the following year.

- L. 11: "Malcolm": Malcolm X, later Al Hajj Malik Al-Shabazz (1925–65).
- L. 12: "LeRoi": LeRoi Jones, now Amiri Baraka (1934—), poet, playwright, and social activist. He was arrested during the 1967 Newark riots and charged with illegal possession of weapons and resisting arrest. Although he was later convicted and sentenced to a three-year jail term, the conviction was reversed on appeal.
- L. 13: "Rap": H. Rap Brown (1943—), now Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin. "Strapped a harness" probably refers to the fact that Brown was on probation and thereby rendered relatively powerless. See note to "Detroit Conference of Unity and Art," page 369.
- L. 14: "Stokely's teeth": Stokely Carmichael, later Kwame Ture (1941–1998). Carmichael became the chairperson of SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) in May 1966 and took the organization in a more radical direction just a month later, when he announced the advent of Black Power. In 1967 he left SNCC to join the Black Panther Party. Giovanni's figure (a toothless panther) suggests that Carmichael has been made harmless.

"Wilmington Delaware"

When Giovanni entered the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Work, she lived in Wilmington, where housing was cheaper than in Philadelphia. Part of her graduate study entailed working at the People's Settlement House in Wilmington, where she continued even after she had dropped out of graduate school. This poem, written during the eight or nine months she lived in Wilmington, is a scathing satire on both the city and its personification, the man who directed the People's Settlement.

L. 16: "Due-pontee": A reference to the du Pont family, whose money helped fund the settlements and much else in the state of Delaware. Founded in 1802 as an explosives company, Du Pont subsequently focused on chemicals and energy, and it is the corporation behind well-known brands such as Teflon, Lycra, and

Dacron. Today it is ranked the seventieth largest U.S. industrial-service corporation, with revenues in 2002 of \$24 billion.

L. 26: "nourishment at the 'Y'": When Giovanni lived in Wilmington, the YMCA was a networking hub for Black businessmen and professionals. The double entendre, like the many orthographic jokes, marks the poem as a youthful composition.

L. 30: "East side of town": In the late 1960s the east side of Wilmington, which had originally been populated by white people, had become predominantly Black; the same was true of the People's Settlement and Christiana Settlement Houses, which were both on the east side.

Ll. 42–43: "party more . . . Asphalt is bad": Possibly a reference to the marches and demonstrations which were used by those in both the Civil Rights and the Black Power movements but which would have been anathema to someone like Wilmington, whose dancing is still a "shuffle," regardless of its "militancy."

Ll. 56–57: "replaced jello . . . jellied gas (a Due-pontee specialty; housewise)": A reference to napalm, a jellied gas produced by the Du Pont Corporation and used extensively in the Vietnam War.

"Letter to a Bourgeois Friend Whom Once I Loved (And Maybe Still Do If Love Is Valid)"

Written in July 1967.

L. 12: "Johnson": Lyndon B. Johnson (1908–73), thirty-sixth President of the United States (1963–69).

L. 13: "Detroit": The summer of 1967 was witness to race riots all over the United States. One of the worst started in Detroit on July 22 and lasted for several days. President Johnson ordered 4,700 federal troops into Detroit. In all some forty-three people were killed, thirty-three of them Black (see Charles M. Christian, Black Saga: The African American Experience, 1995).

L. 18: "Rap": H. Rap Brown, now Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin (1943–). See note to "Detroit Conference of Unity and Art," page 369.

"Love Poem (For Real)"

- Ll. 10–11: "go back/to half": The poem was written in December 1968, just weeks before Richard M. Nixon (1913–94) was inaugurated the thirty-seventh President of the United States (1969–74). Nineteen sixty-eight was a devastating year in American history—both Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated, in April and June, respectively.
- L. 13: "johnson": Lyndon B. Johnson (1908–73), thirty-sixth President of the United States (1963–69).
 - L. 22: "cabinet": A reference to Nixon's choices for his cabinet.
- L. 23: "no dick": A phrase used frequently by Giovanni and others to refer to President Nixon.
- L. 28: "united quakers": Nixon's religious background was Quaker.
 - L. 28: "crackers": White people.
 - L. 38: "honkies": White people.
- Ll. 39–41: "riderless horses... eternal flame": Most likely a reference to the funeral of John F. Kennedy (1917–63), thirty-fifth President of the United States (1961–63), and the eternal flame that marks his grave.

"For an Intellectual Audience"

In an interview Giovanni told me that she has always associated the made-up word *moile* with Dr. Seuss's *Horton Hears a Who*. In that story, the "whos" live in an elephant's ear. Because they want the elephant to know they are there, they all agree to shout at the same time—and, except for one little who, they do. Only when that little who also shouts does Horton hear them. The whos live in a little ball, and Giovanni said she thought of the little ball as a *moile*.

Black Judgement

Black Judgement was originally published in 1968, just a few months after Black Feeling Black Talk. Giovanni invested the money she had made from the sales of Black Feeling Black Talk in professional cover art and high-quality printing for her second self-published volume; the cover included photographs of LeRoi Jones, Rap Brown, Ron Karenga, and Charles Kenyatta. She also experimented with the appearance of the poems on the page: they are alternately justified on the left side and the right side. Of the twenty-seven poems originally constituting this volume, twenty-six were written in 1968; many reflect the poet's responses to the devastating public events of that year: the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in April; the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy in June; and the election of Richard M. Nixon as the thirty-seventh president in November.

Within six months of its publication, *Black Judgement* had sold 6,000 copies, a phenomenal figure. Containing what Margaret Walker called Giovanni's "signature poem"—"Nikki-Rosa"—the volume signaled to the literary world that a new, serious writer had emerged.

The original publication of *Black Judgement* included the following lines on its title page:

Sometimes we find we have nothing to give
but love
which is a poem
which I give
For the Black Revolution

"The Dance Committee (Concerning Jean-Léon Destiné)"

During her stint at the People's Settlement House in Wilmington, Giovanni organized a Black Arts Festival to which she invited—and succeeded in bringing—the distinguished Haitian dancer and choreographer Jean-Léon Destiné (1925–).

L. 2: "Fanon": Frantz Fanon (1925–61), a West Indian philosopher and psychoanalyst who argued that the victims of oppression (especially of colonialism and racism) should and would eventually turn to violence and that the violence would be redemptive. His work influenced many groups in the 1960s, including members of the Black Panthers. His most influential works were *Black Skin*, White Masks (1952) and The Wretched of the Earth (1961).

- L. 13: "double V": A verbal play on the campaign spearheaded by the Black press during World War II; "Double V" meant "victory at home and victory abroad."
- L. 18: "wouldn't be in the Black community": The dance troupe performed in a white high school rather than at the People's Settlement House, which was in the Black community.
- L. 19: "Black French": Haiti (home of Destiné) was originally a French colony.

"Of Liberation"

- L. 12: "3/5 of a man": The U.S. Constitution originally defined a male slave as three fifths of a man.
- Ll. 35–36: "The last bastion . . . mind": In her public readings, Giovanni attributes this statement to the historian Lerone Bennett, Jr., author of *Before the Mayflower* and other works.
- L. 91: "The Red Black and Green": Especially during the 1960s, Black Nationalists began sporting these colors as a symbol of Blackness and Black solidarity. The origin of these colors, however, dates back to Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which was founded in 1914 and promoted the unification of African peoples throughout the Diaspora. The UNIA's flag was red, black, and green.
- L. 97: "Professor Neal": Larry Neal (1937–1981), poet, dramatist, and essayist, was a central figure in the Black Arts movement.

"Poem for Black Boys (With Special Love to James)"

This is the only poem in the volume not written during 1968 (its date of composition was April 2, 1967).

- L. 5: "Mau Mau": The Mau Mau movement in Kenya led a revolt against British rule and eventually helped bring about Kenyan independence in 1963.
- L.7: "Rap Brown": H. Rap Brown, now Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin (1943–). See note to "Detroit Conference of Unity and Art," page 369.
 - L. 31: "any nickel bag": A reference to a bag of marijuana.

"Concerning One Responsible Negro with Too Much Power"

This poem was written on April 3, 1968, just one day before the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. The National Guard was moved into Wilmington, where Giovanni was living, on April 3, which led her (in retrospect) to believe that the federal government knew King would be assassinated the next day; Wilmington was key to the flow of traffic up and down the East Coast. Giovanni herself managed to get out of the city just before all traffic was stopped in the wake of King's assassination.

The poem seems to be about the individual described in "Wilmington Delaware." See note to that poem on page 375.

"Reflections on April 4, 1968"

Written just one day after King's assassination, this poem considers it "an act of war," the only response to which can be the destruction of white America. The prose form reinforces the devastating impact of this event on the poet.

Stanza 2: "President johnson": A reference to Lyndon B. Johnson (1908–73), thirty-sixth President of the United States (1963–69).

Stanza 2: "distinction between us and negroes": See note to "The True Import of Present Dialogue" on page 373.

Stanza 4: "the warriors in the streets": Following King's assassination, riots broke out in more than one hundred cities across the country.

Stanza 5: "statements from Dallas": A reference to the site of the assassination of John F. Kennedy (1917–63), thirty-fifth President of the United States, on November 22, 1963.

Stanza 6: "Johnson's footprints": A reference to the fact that Lyndon B. Johnson (1908–73) succeeded to the presidency because of the assassination of John Kennedy; Johnson was Kennedy's vice president (1961–63).

Stanza 7: "Zeus has wrestled the Black Madonna": In Greek mythology, Zeus was the chief Olympian god. Here he is represented as having been defeated by Black Christianity. The Shrine

of the Black Madonna, a Black church originally established in Detroit, has an eighteen-foot sculpture of a Black Madonna.

Stanza 7: "nadinolia gods": Nadinolia is a product advertised to lighten skin color.

Stanza 7: "fire this time": A reference to James Baldwin's best-selling *The Fire Next Time*, published in 1963. Baldwin (1924–87) insisted that if Black Americans did not gain their essential liberties, there would be a revolution of fire, which would destroy the country.

"The Funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr."

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–68) was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4, 1968. His funeral in Atlanta, Georgia, was on April 9, 1968.

"A Litany for Peppe"

Peppe was a childhood nickname for the poet's nephew, Christopher Black (1959–).

Line 8: "Blessed be": Allusion to Christ's beatitudes. See Matthew 5:1-11.

Line 13: See note to "Wilmington Delaware" on page 375.

Ll. 19–20: "Blessed is . . . earth": An inversion of Christ's beatitudes. See Matthew 5:1–11.

"Nikki-Rosa"

"Nikki-Rosa" was the nickname given to the poet when she was a child by her sister, Gary. The poem, described by Margaret Walker as Giovanni's signature poem, was written on April 12, 1968.

L. 3: "Woodlawn": A suburb of Cincinnati in which Giovanni and her family lived briefly before they moved to nearby Wyoming.

Ll. 15–18: "Hollydale . . . stock": Hollydale is a subdivision outside Cincinnati that was created for Black people. Giovanni's father was one of many who pooled their money to buy the land. They intended to use the land as collateral for the loans to build

houses. But because they were Black, they could not find banks to lend them the money. Eventually the homes in Hollydale would be built, but the poet's father, like many others, was unable to keep his money tied up for so long. He sold his stock and used the proceeds as a down payment on a house in Lincoln Heights.

"The Great Pax Whitie"

- L. 1: See John 1:1-5.
- L. 8: "peace be still": These are the words spoken by Jesus when he calmed the waters of the Sea of Galilee; see Mark 4:39. The biblical story is also the basis of the gospel song, "Peace, Be Still," by James Cleveland. On her award-winning album *Truth Is on Its Way*, Giovanni reads this poem to the accompaniment of the song, performed by the New York Community Choir.
- L. 18: "Lot's wife . . . Morton company": For the account of Lot's wife being turned into a pillar of salt, see Genesis 19:1–26.
- L. 24: "our Black Madonna": A reference to the eighteen-foot sculpture in the Shrine of the Black Madonna in Detroit.
- Ll. 28–34: In Mark's version of the story, when Jesus is brought before the high priests for interrogation, Peter is present. When asked directly about his knowledge of Jesus, Peter denies any association with him. See Mark 14:53–72. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus says to Peter, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church," a statement which in the Greek involves a play on words (petros means "little rock"). The interpretation of this statement has sharply divided Christians; Giovanni makes reference to the interpretation of the Roman Catholic Church.
- L. 37: "Carthaginians": Carthage was an ancient city of North Africa on the Bay of Tunis. Despite having one of the greatest military leaders of the ancient world—Hannibal—the city was ultimately defeated by Roman forces.
- L. 38: "great appian way": The most famous of the Roman roads, the Appian Way connected Rome to Greece and the East.
- L. 39: "the Moors": A nomadic people of North Africa, the Moors, who became Muslims, established kingdoms throughout Spain. During the Middle Ages, Christian rulers attempted to con-

quer Moorish strongholds. The last Moorish city was Granada, which was conquered by Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492, and most of the Moors were driven out of Spain.

- L. 53: "great emancipator": Abraham Lincoln (1809–65), sixteenth President of the United States (1861–65).
- L. 55: "making the world safe for democracy": From Woodrow Wilson's April 2, 1917, address to Congress, in which he sought a declaration of war.
- L. 58: "barbecued six million": A reference to Hitler's genocidal attack on the Jews.
- L. 60: "38th parallel": A reference to the division of Korea, at the end of World War II, at the Thirty-eighth Parallel into the Soviet-occupied North and the U.S. occupied South. The Korean War resulted when North Korea crossed this line and invaded South Korea.
- L. 63: "champagne was shipped out of the East": Giovanni told me in an interview that she intended this as a reference to the defeat of the French in 1954 in the French Indochina War.
- Ll. 64–65: "kosher pork...Africa": Giovanni stated in an interview with me that this line compares the Zionists in Israel to pigs.
- Ll. 71–72: "great white prince . . . texas": John F. Kennedy (1917–63), thirty-fifth President of the United States.
- Ll. 73–74: "Black shining prince . . . cathedral": Malcolm X, later Al Hajj Malik Al-Shabazz (1925–65), was assassinated on February 21, 1965, at the Audubon Ballroom in New York City. A charismatic Black Nationalist leader, he was suspended from the Black Muslim movement and subsequently founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity. He was gunned down by three Black Muslims who were eventually convicted, but controversy about his assassination continues. Thomas à Becket (1118–70) was Archbishop of Canterbury. King Henry II of England and Becket were friends when then Archbishop Theobald died; Henry appointed Becket to the post in hopes of strengthening his own position visà-vis the Church. But Becket did not automatically support the king; their relationship deteriorated steadily. In a standoff about

the power of the state over the Church, King Henry became infuriated with Becket and apparently spoke words to the effect that he wished someone would rid him of the archbishop. Four knights hoping to gain favor with Henry went to Canterbury and killed Becket on the altar of the cathedral, in the midst of a service. Not only did the knights fail in their attempt to court Henry's favor but the king himself, some four years later, made a penitential walk through Canterbury and spent the night in Becket's crypt.

L. 75: "our nigger in memphis": Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–68), who was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4, 1968.

"Knoxville, Tennessee"

Giovanni and her sister usually spent their summers with their maternal grandparents, Louvenia and John Brown Watson, in Knoxville.

"Records"

U.S. Senator Robert F. Kennedy (1925–68), a presidential candidate, was shot in Los Angeles on June 5, 1968, and died on June 6. This poem was written on June 6, the day before Giovanni's twenty-fifth birthday.

L. 5: "johnson": President Lyndon B. Johnson (1908–73), thirty-sixth President of the United States (1963–69).

L. 13: "family": The Kennedy family.

L. 17: "bobby": Senator Robert F. Kennedy.

"Adulthood (For Claudia)"

Claudia Anderson was a friend in Cincinnati with whom Giovanni worked at Walgreens.

Ll. 2-4: "indianapolis . . . my aunt": Giovanni often visited one of her aunts, Agnes Chapman, who lived in Indianapolis, a short distance from Cincinnati.

L. 36: "hammarskjöld": Dag Hammarskjöld (1905–61), secretary-general of the United Nations (1953–61). He was killed on his way to the Congo when his plane crashed in northern Rhodesia (now Zambia).

L. 37: "lumumba": Patrice Lumumba (1925–61) was the first prime minister of the Republic of the Congo (now Zaire). A charismatic leader of the independence movement in the Congo, Lumumba had radical anticolonialist politics that eventually led to a split in the Congo's first national political party, Mouvement National Congolais, which he founded in 1958. He was killed in January 1961; both his death and unsuccessful attempts to cover up the truth about it outraged activists throughout the world. The possible role played by the Belgian or the U.S. government in his death is still uncertain.

L. 38: "diem": Ngo Dinh Diem (1901–63), president (1955–63) of South Vietnam, murdered in a military coup which was covertly backed by the United States on November 1, 1963.

L. 39: "kennedy": John F. Kennedy (1917–63), thirty-fifth President of the United States, was assassinated on November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas.

L. 40: "malcolm": Malcolm X, later Al Hajj Malik Al-Shabazz (1925–65), was assassinated on February 21, 1965, at the Audubon Ballroom in New York City. A charismatic Black Nationalist leader, he was suspended from the Nation of Islam and subsequently founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity. He was gunned down by three Black Muslims who were eventually convicted, but controversy about his assassination—for example, the possible role in it of the federal government—continues.

L. 41: "evers": Medgar Wiley Evers (1925–63), Civil Rights activist and Mississippi field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), was murdered in the doorway of his home in Jackson, Mississippi, on June 12, 1963, by the white supremacist Byron de la Beckwith. Beckwith stood trial twice, in 1963 and 1964, but not until 1994 was he convicted of the crime.

L. 42: "schwerner, chaney and goodman": Michael Schwerner (1940–64), James E. Chaney (1943–64), and Andrew Goodman

(1943–64) were three Civil Rights activists who worked in Black voter registration in Mississippi and were murdered by members of the Ku Klux Klan, with the complicity of law enforcement officers. After a massive search, including 200 naval personnel, their bodies were found buried not far from Philadelphia, Mississippi. Despite the fact that everyone—including the Federal Bureau of Investigation—knew who the killers were, it was three years before Neshoba County Sheriff Lawrence Rainey, Chief Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price, and five others were convicted on federal charges of violating the civil rights of the three. No state charges were ever filed.

L. 43: "liuzzo": Viola Gregg Liuzzo (1925–65), a medical lab technician, mother, and activist from Michigan. She was killed in an automobile on the Selma Highway on March 26, 1965, because a car with members of the Ku Klux Klan saw her, a white woman, in the same automobile as a black man. The four KKK members were arrested, and one agreed to testify against the other three, but they were all acquitted of murder. Eventually, through orders from President Johnson, they were convicted on federal charges of conspiring to deprive Liuzzo of her civil rights. Viola Liuzzo is the only white woman honored at the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama.

L. 44: "stokely": Stokely Carmichael, later Kwame Ture (1941–98), Civil Rights activist, chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (1966–67), and "prime minister" of the Black Panthers. Carmichael is credited with creating the slogan "Black Power." He moved to Guinea in 1968, and in 1973 he became a citizen of Uganda.

L. 45: "le roi": LeRoi Jones, now Amiri Baraka (1934–). See note to "Poem (No Name No. 3)," page 374.

L. 46: "rap": H. Rap Brown, now Jamil Abdullah Al-Amín (1943–). See note to "Detroit Conference of Unity and Art," page 369.

L. 47: "pollard, thompson and cooper": Three SNCC workers on their way to California who were killed in Texas.

- L. 48: "king": Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-68).
- L. 49: "kennedy": Robert F. Kennedy (1925-68).

"From a Logical Point of View"

L. 12: "dream deferred": See Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem," the famous first line of which is "What happens to a dream deferred?"

"Dreams"

- L. 6: "raelet": The Raelettes (originally known as the Cookies) were a female backup trio for the singer Ray Charles.
- L. 7: "dr o wn d in my youn tears": "Drown in My Own Tears" was one of Ray Charles's big hits.
- L. 8: "tal kin bout": Another Ray Charles hit, "Talking About You."
- L. 9: "marjorie hendricks": Marjorie Hendricks was the gritty-voiced lead singer of the Raelettes.
- L. 12: "baaaaaby nightandday": Words from another big Ray Charles hit, "The Night Time Is the Right Time."
- L. 19: "sweet inspiration": The Sweet Inspirations were background singers for Atlantic Records. The lead singer was Cissy Houston (mother of Whitney); the others were Estelle Brown, Sylvia Shemwell, and Myrna Smith. The Sweet Inspirations, who sang background vocals for many of Aretha Franklin's hits, sang three-part harmony, unlike the Raelettes, who sang the blues.

"Revolutionary Music"

This poem, which is both about and constructed from the names of musical groups, themes, and songs, asserts the political implications of much popular music recorded by Black musicians during the 1960s. It was cited by Stephen Henderson as an excellent example of "the use of tonal memory as poetic structure" in Black poetry. By "tonal memory," he means "the practice . . . of forcing the reader to incorporate into the structure of the poem his memory of a specific song, or passage of a song, or even of a spe-

- cific delivery technique. Without this specific memory the poem cannot be properly realized." See Stephen Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* (New York: William Morrow, 1973), pp. 53–54.
- Ll. 1–2: "sly/and the family stone": Sly and the Family Stone was an important musical group in the late 1960s; they brought together gospel, rhythm and blues, and rock.
- L. 4: "dancing to the music": "Dance to the Music" was the first major hit by Sly and the Family Stone.
- L. 5: "james brown": James Brown (1933–), the Godfather of Soul, inventor of funk, and quite likely the most important contributor to and influence on soul music.
- Ll. 11–14: "although you happy . . . taking you on": This line is from "Money Won't Change You," a big hit for James Brown that later was covered by Aretha Franklin.
- L. 19: "good god! ugh!": Words from James Brown's "I Can't Stand Myself (When You Touch Me)."
- L. 21: "i got the feeling baby": Another James Brown hit, "I've Got the Feeling."
- L. 23: "martha and the vandellas dancing in the street": Martha and the Vandellas, one of the most important girl groups of the 1960s, were a gritty and soulful alternative to their chief rivals, the Supremes. The group originated in Detroit in 1962 and was anchored by Martha Reeves, the lead singer. "Dancin' in the Streets" was perhaps their biggest hit. In an interview, Giovanni stated that she and other young Black revolutionaries understood the song to be a coded reference to the Detroit riots.
- L. 24: "shorty long...at that junction": Frederick "Shorty" Long, born in Birmingham, Alabama, was a musician and recording artist who signed with Motown in 1963. He cowrote (with Eddie Holland) and performed "Function at the Junction," which eventually became a classic and which carries a strong political message.
- Ll. 26–27: "aretha said they better/think": Aretha Franklin (1942–), the undisputed "Queen of Soul." "Think" was a hit single with significant political overtones; it was recorded on the album *Aretha Now*, released in 1968.

- L. 29: "ain't no way to love you": "Ain't No Way," which was written by Aretha Franklin's sister, Carolyn, was recorded on the album *Lady Soul*, released in 1968.
- L. 31: "the o'jays": Taking their name from the radio DJ Eddie O'Jay, the O'Jays had more than fifty hit singles during their forty-year career.
- L. 34: "mighty mighty impressions": The Impressions were a Chicago group led by Curtis Mayfield; the original group also included Jerry Butler, whose lead vocals helped make "For Your Precious Love" a huge hit and launched Butler's solo career. Among their many hits was the 1968 "We're a Winner," one of the earliest R & B celebrations of Black pride.
- L. 40: "temptations": The Temptations, a five-member group, were the most successful of Motown's male vocal groups.
- L. 41: "supremes": The Supremes, eventually a three-member group, were the most successful of Motown's female vocal groups.
- L. 42: "delfonics": A male trio, the Delfonics were one of the first groups to exhibit the smooth and soulful style that eventually became known as the "Philly sound."
- L. 43: "miracles": The Miracles, a male vocal group led by the singer and songwriter Smokey Robinson, helped define the Motown sound.
- L. 44: "intruders": The Intruders were a male vocal group from Philadelphia who signed with Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff's record company, Philadelphia International Records. They were innovators in the Philly sound.
- L. 45: "beatles": Contrary to the suggestion of these lines, Giovanni is actually an admirer of the music of the Beatles (witness her poem "This Is Not for John Lennon," page 307).
- L. 45: "animals": A British male quintet, the Animals were one of the most important of the British R & B groups of the 1960s.
- L. 46: "young rascals": A white, male rock band, the Young Rascals had a penchant for playing Black soul music, sometimes dubbed "blue-eyed soul."
- L. 49: "sam cooke": Sam Cooke (1931–64) was a popular and influential singer who emerged in the 1950s as a gospel star and

then began recording popular songs, including the megahits "You Send Me" and "Wonderful World." His influence on soul music as well as on many of its best-known performers cannot be overstated. "A Change Is Gonna Come," recorded in February 1964, was his last great ballad. Controversy still surrounds his violent death.

"Beautiful Black Men (With compliments and apologies to all not mentioned by name)"

- L. 9: "running numbers": The numbers was a popular illegal gambling game played in Black communities all over the country, similar to (and largely replaced by) state lotteries. A numbers runner (analogous to a bookie) collected and paid off bets made each day.
 - L. 10: "hogs": Cadillac automobiles.
- L. 11: "walking their dogs": "Walking the Dog" was a dance popularized by Rufus Thomas, a DJ in Memphis and father of Carla Thomas, who recorded the smash hit "Gee Whiz (Look at His Eyes)."
- L. 15: "jerry butler": The performer and composer Jerry "the Iceman" Butler started his career as a member of the Impressions and subsequently had many hit songs as a soloist.
- L.15: "Wilson pickett": Wilson Pickett was unrivaled in the sheer energy he brought to a number of hits in the 1960s, including "In the Midnight Hour" and "Mustang Sally."
- L. 15: "the impressions": The Impressions were a Chicago group led by Curtis Mayfield; the original group also included Jerry Butler, whose lead vocals helped make "For Your Precious Love" a huge hit and launched Butler's solo career.
- L. 16: "temptations": The Temptations, a five-member group, were the most successful of Motown's male vocal groups.
- L. 16: "mighty mighty sly": Sly and the Family Stone was an important group in the late 1960s; they brought together gospel, rhythm and blues, and rock.
- L. 20: "new breed men": New Breed was a store in Harlem in the 1960s.

L. 20: "breed alls": Overalls made of leather, suede, or velvet, popular in the late 1960s.

"Ugly Honkies, or The Election Game and How to Win It"

The first portion of the poem (lines 1–149) was written on August 8, 1968, and the postelection lines (150–58) were written on November 18.

- L. 5: "lyndon": Lyndon B. Johnson (1908–73), thirty-sixth President of the United States (1963–69).
- L. 6: "ike": Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890–1969), thirty-fourth President of the United States (1953–61).
- L. 6: "nixon": Richard M. Nixon (1913–94), vice president under Eisenhower (1953–61) and thirty-seventh President of the United States (1969–74).
- L. 6: "hhh": Hubert H. Humphrey (1911–78), vice president to Lyndon B. Johnson (1965–69), and the Democratic presidential candidate in 1968. He narrowly lost the 1968 election to Richard Nixon.
- L. 6: "wallace": George C. Wallace (1919–98), governor of Alabama for multiple terms. Wallace was an open segregationist who attempted to block integration of public schools in the 1960s. He was an Independent presidential candidate in the 1968 election, in which he received roughly 13 percent of the vote and carried five Southern states.
- L. 6: "maddox": Lester Maddox (1915–2003), governor of Georgia from 1967 to 1971 and lieutenant governor from 1971 to 1975. Before he entered politics Maddox gained notoriety for closing down his Atlanta restaurant (1964) rather than desegregate it. He unsuccessfully sought the 1968 Democratic presidential nomination.
- L. 16: "daley": Richard J. Daley (1902–76), Democratic mayor of Chicago from 1955 to 1976. Daley brought national attention to himself during the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago by allowing city police to use violence against demonstrators protesting the Vietnam War.
 - L. 17: "booing senator ribicoff": At the 1968 Democratic Con-

vention in Chicago, Senator Abraham Ribicoff (1910–98) nominated George McGovern (1922–) to be the party's presidential candidate. In his nomination speech, Ribicoff referred to the "Gestapo tactics on the streets of Chicago," which provoked a torrent of expletives from Daley. Ribicoff was Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare under President John F. Kennedy and served as a U.S. senator from Connecticut from 1963 to 1981.

- L. 21: "julian bond": Julian Bond (1940–) served four terms in the Georgia House of Representatives (1967–74) and six terms in the Georgia Senate (1975–87). He was first elected to a one-year term in 1965, but the House refused to seat him because of his opposition to the Vietnam War. He was again elected in 1966 to fill his own vacant seat, and the House again voted against seating him. After he won a third election, to a two-year term, in November 1966, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled unanimously that the Georgia House had violated Bond's rights. Bond had been one of the founding members of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and subsequently editor of the protest newspaper *The Atlanta Inquirer*. He is currently chairman of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People).
 - L. 24: "life": Life magazine.
- L. 24: "muskie and huskie humphrey": Edmund Muskie (1914–96) was a U.S. senator from Maine (1958–80). He was the Democratic running mate of Hubert H. Humphrey (see page 391) in the 1968 presidential election.
- L. 30: "john and bobby": John F. Kennedy (1917–63) and Robert F. Kennedy (1925–68), both assassinated.
- L. 31: "evers and king": Medgar Wiley Evers (1925–63) and Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–68). See note to "Adulthood," page 384.
- L. 32: "caroline": Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg (1957–), daughter of President John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy. An attorney and writer, she is today president of the Kennedy Library Foundation.
- L. 34: "arthur miller": Arthur A. Miller (1915–), award-winning playwright, author of *Death of a Salesman*. Miller in fact

attended the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago as the delegate from Roxbury.

- Ll. 46–47: "and hhh says . . . wrong": The 1968 presidential candidate Hubert H. Humphrey refused to denounce Chicago's Mayor Daley for his deployment of the police during the convention.
- L. 55: "politics of '64": The 1964 Democratic ticket was President Lyndon B. Johnson and Hubert H. Humphrey. Johnson had succeeded to the presidency after the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963; because he was the sitting president, his election in 1964 was virtually guaranteed, and he enjoyed a landslide victory over Barry M. Goldwater, the Republican candidate.
- Ll. 56–62: "the deal . . . chicago": Giovanni's argument is that the leaders of the Republican and Democratic political parties conspired together, agreeing that Johnson would be allowed to win the presidency in 1964 in return for which Nixon would be allowed to win the 1968 election. The 1968 Democratic Convention produced a candidate (Humphrey) less likely to win than, for example, Robert F. Kennedy might have been had he not been assassinated. Like many intellectuals of the 1960s, Giovanni was convinced that national events were orchestrated through the conspiracies of a few powerful figures.
- L. 56: "the bird": An allusion to President Johnson's wife, "Lady Bird" Johnson.
- L. 58: "dallas": An allusion to Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, Texas.
- L. 60: "los angeles": An allusion to the assassination of the presidential hopeful Robert F. Kennedy in June 1968, in Los Angeles.
- L. 61: "tricky dick": Nickname for Richard M. Nixon (1913–94), thirty-seventh President of the United States (1969–74), who was forced to resign early in his second term.
 - L. 62: "chicago": Site of the 1968 Democratic Convention.
- L. 66: "second reconstruction": Just as the first Reconstruction, following the Civil War, was largely a failure and was followed by increasing violence against Blacks in the South and the erosion

of their civil liberties, Giovanni sees the events leading to the election of Nixon as tied to the erosion of gains made during the Civil Rights movement.

L. 77: "gregory or cleaver": An allusion to the comedian and activist Dick Gregory (1932—), who ran for president in 1968, and to Eldridge Cleaver (1935–98), Black militant minister of information for the Black Panthers; Cleaver was wounded in a Panther shoot-out with police in 1968, jumped bail, and fled to Algeria.

L. 81: "nixon-agnew": Spiro T. Agnew (1918–96), Richard Nixon's running mate in the 1968 presidential election. Formerly the governor of Maryland, Agnew served as vice president from 1969 to 1973, when he resigned after being fined for income tax evasion.

Ll. 87–88: "about nigeria...on'": An allusion to the thirty-month civil war in Nigeria, also known as the Biafran War (1967–70), which cost an estimated one million lives, most of them lost to starvation.

L. 119: "mccarthy": Eugene J. McCarthy (1916—) was a candidate for the 1968 Democratic presidential nomination. He announced his candidacy in 1967 on an antiwar platform, challenging President Johnson and his policies. McCarthy's campaign success in New Hampshire (in March 1968) helped draw Robert F. Kennedy into the race and influenced President Johnson's decision not to seek reelection. McCarthy was a U.S. representative from Minnesota from 1949 to 1959 and a U.S. Senator from 1959 to 1971. After he lost the presidential nomination, he finished his term in the Senate and returned to university teaching.

L. 124: "the assassination of one": A reference to Robert F. Kennedy.

L. 128: "teddy": A reference to Senator Edward M. Kennedy (1932–), brother of John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy, and a member of the U.S. Senate since 1962.

L. 150: "wallace": George C. Wallace, who ran as an Independent in the 1968 presidential election; see note to line 6 on page 391.

"Cultural Awareness"

- L. 17: "maulana": Maulana Karenga, a Black Nationalist, first instituted the celebration of Kwanza (Swahili for "first fruits") in 1966.
- L. 17: "elijah": Elijah Muhammad (1897–1975), longtime leader (1933–75) of the Nation of Islam.
- L. 17: "el shabbaz": Malcolm X, later Al Hajj Malik Al-Shabazz (1925–65), was assassinated on February 21, 1965, at the Audubon Ballroom in New York City.
 - L. 23: "zig-zag papers": Used to roll marijuana.

"For Saundra"

L. 21: "no-Dick": Richard M. Nixon (1913–94), thirty-seventh President of the United States (1969–74).

"For a Poet I Know"

- L. 14: "aretha": Aretha Franklin (1942–), "Queen of Soul."
- L. 15: "james brown's is humphrey": James Brown (1933—), "Godfather of Soul," was an important supporter of Hubert H. Humphrey and his presidential campaign.
- L. 16: "columbia": This poem was written in January 1968, when Giovanni was enrolled in Columbia University.
- L. 29: "joe goncalves": Dingane Joe Goncalves, founder of Journal of Black Poetry.
- L. 30: "carolyn rodgers": Carolyn M. Rodgers (1945–), Chicago-born poet associated with the Black Arts movement.
- L. 31: "hoyt fuller": Hoyt Fuller (1927–81), journalist, educator, and editor of *Black World* (formerly *Negro Digest*), an important publication during the 1960s and early 1970s.
 - L. 32: "jet poem": A reference to Jet magazine.

"For Teresa"

Teresa Elliott was a close friend of Giovanni's mother.

- L. 24: "peppe": The poet's nephew, Christopher Black (1959-).
- L. 26: "gary": The poet's sister, Gary Ann (1940–).

"My Poem"

L. 3: "wrote a poem": A reference to "The True Import of Present Dialogue, Black vs. Negro," page 19.

Re: Creation

Re: Creation was published in 1970 by Broadside Press. It is composed of forty-two poems (including the poem of dedication), which were written between May 1969 and July 1970, that is, during the last few months of Giovanni's pregnancy and the first year of her son's life.

"For Tommy"

In the original edition, this poem was under the heading "Dedication." Thomas Watson Giovanni, the poet's only child, was born August 31, 1969.

"Two Poems From Barbados"

These two poems were written in June 1969 and July 1969, respectively.

"For Harold Logan (Murdered by 'persons unknown' cause he wanted to own a Black club on Broadway)"

Harold Logan, together with the rhythm and blues singer Lloyd Price, acquired in the 1960s the old Birdland jazz club, just north of Fifty-second Street on Broadway. Although Logan and Price dubbed the club the Turntable (also the name of their recording company), it continued to be remembered affectionately as Birdland. It was, of course, closed on Sundays, and the intrepid Giovanni decided it would be a great place to have a book party to promote *Black Judgement*. She approached Logan, who let her use it with the proviso that she bring in at least a hundred people; if she failed to do so, she would have to pay him \$500. Logan was rumored to be connected to the mob, which gave Giovanni added incentive to advertise her event and fill the house. Ironically, she

did such effective publicity that people were lined up for over a block to get in. The offices of *The New York Times* overlooked this line, and a reporter got interested in where all those people were going on a Sunday afternoon. A photograph and story were featured in the *Times* on Monday, which boosted Giovanni's sales even more.

Logan was, in fact, brutally murdered inside the club, and Price distanced himself as much as possible; he moved to Africa and involved himself in nonmusical ventures through most of the 1970s. After he returned to the United States in the early 1980s, Price's career took on new life, and he continues to perform at concerts and festivals.

"No Reservations (for Art Jones)"

Art Jones was a prisoner who wrote Giovanni a letter.

"For Gwendolyn Brooks"

This poem was written for *To Gwen With Love: An Anthology Dedicated to Gwendolyn Brooks*, which was published in 1971 by Johnson Publishing Company. In the anthology, the poem has the subtitle "a 'note of love.'"

"Poem for Aretha"

L. 55: "billie holiday's life": Billie Holiday (1915–59), influential but tragic jazz singer whose life was marked by financial difficulties, attachments to abusive men, and addiction to drugs.

L. 56: "dinah washington's death": Dinah Washington (1924–63), singer and pianist whose range included blues, gospel, rhythm and blues, and pop. She died of an accidental overdose of sleeping pills.

L. 67: "johnny ace": John Marshall Alexander, Jr., a.k.a. Johnny Ace (1929–54), popular rhythm and blues singer whose premature, bizarre death sustained his reputation long after he had died. Franklin covered several songs he had written, including "Never Let Me Go" and "My Song."

L. 67 "lil green": Lil Green (1919-54), Chicago blues singer

who achieved a successful touring and recording career. One of her big hits was "Romance in the Dark," which Franklin recorded as "In the Dark."

- Ll. 69–70: "'i say a little prayer'... anymore": Dionne Warwick (1940–), pop singer whose string of hits from her collaboration with Burt Bacharach and Hal David earned her multiple Grammys. "I Say a Little Prayer" was a Bacharach-David composition for Warwick that Franklin later recorded as well.
- L. 71: "money won't change you": This song was initially a James Brown hit.
- L. 72: "james can't sing 'respect'": "Respect," written by Otis Redding, was one of Franklin's biggest hits, if not her signature song. Although she had a hit with her cover of James Brown's "Money Can't Change You," Brown could not similarly record "Respect."
- L. 73: "ray charles from marlboro country": In the 1960s, Ray Charles moved away from R & B into country and western music, recording, for example, "Your Cheatin' Heart" in 1962.
- L. 75: "nancy wilson": Nancy Wilson (1937–) jazz and pop singer.
 - L. 77: "dionne": Dionne Warwick; see note to line 69.
- L. 81: "you make me/feel": One of Franklin's big hits was "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman," first released on her 1968 album, *Lady Soul*. The song was written by Carole King and Jerry Wexler.
- L. 81: "the blazers": Dyke & the Blazers, a little remembered R & B group led by Dyke Christian (1943–71); they had a huge hit with "Let a Woman Be a Woman—Let a Man Be a Man."
- Ll. 83–85: "when my soul...claim it": Another line from Franklin's "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman."
- L. 85: "joplin said 'maybe'": Janis Joplin (1943–70), blues and rock and roll star who died of an accidental drug overdose. She had a hit song entitled "Maybe."
- Ll. 87–89: "when humphrey...james brown": Franklin declined to help with Hubert Humphrey's presidential campaign, but James Brown agreed to do so.

L. 90: "otis": Otis Redding (1941–67), one of the greatest soul singers and writers of all time, was killed in an airplane crash in Madison, Wisconsin. Although some people aboard survived the crash, Redding and four members of his backup group, the Bar-Kays, were killed; Giovanni has stated her belief that the crash was not an accident. Redding wrote "Respect," which Franklin recorded in the spring of 1967 (he died on December 10 of that year).

Ll. 91–92: "the impressions . . . 'moving/on up'": The Impressions were a Chicago group led by Curtis Mayfield; the original group also included Jerry Butler, whose lead vocals helped make "For Your Precious Love" a huge hit and launched Butler's solo career. The quoted line is from their hit song, "We're a Winner."

L. 98: "temptations say . . . 'think about it'": The Temptations, a five-member group, were the most successful of Motown's male vocal groups.

"Revolutionary Dreams"

Ll. 12–i5: "natural/dreams... natural": This poem makes use of Aretha Franklin's 1968 hit song, "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman."

"Walking Down Park"

- L. 1: "park": Park Avenue in New York City.
- L. 2: "amsterdam": Amsterdam Avenue in New York City.
- L. 3: "columbus": Columbus Avenue in New York City.
- L. 18: "central park": Central Park in New York City.
- L. 30: "time's squares": A play on Times Square, also in New York City.

"Kidnap Poem"

- L. 6 "jones beach": Jones Beach State Park in Wantagh, Long Island.
- L. 7: "coney island": Coney Island is an amusement park and beach spot in Brooklyn, New York.
 - L. 16: "red Black green": Especially during the 1960s, Black

Nationalists began sporting these colors as a symbol of Blackness and Black solidarity. The origin of the colors, however, dates back to Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which was founded in 1914 and promoted the unification of all African peoples throughout the Diaspora. The UNIA's flag was red, black, and green.

"The Genie in the Jar (For Nina Simone)"

Nina Simone (1933–2003), "High Priestess of Soul," musician, singer, and political diva. Giovanni dedicated two poems to Simone, with whom she enjoyed a brief friendship; the other is "Poem (For Nina)," page 175.

"The Lion In Daniel's Den (for Paul Robeson, Sr.)"

Paul Robeson (1898-1976) was an activist, athlete, singer, and actor. The son of a runaway slave and an abolitionist Quaker, Robeson won a four-year academic scholarship to Rutgers University, where he excelled in both athletics and academics: he won fifteen varsity letters in sports, was initiated into Phi Beta Kappa in his junior year, and graduated as valedictorian. Despite having been named twice to the All-American Football Team, he was not inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame until 1995, nearly two decades after his death. He attended Columbia Law School and practiced law briefly but then turned to theater and music. He played many lead roles on the stage for which he won international acclaim, and he starred in a number of films. His outspokenness about injustice and inequality eventually led to charges of being a Communist brought against him by the House Un-American Activities Committee, which grievously harmed his career. In 1950 the United States revoked his passport, and he struggled for eight years to regain it so as to be able to travel abroad, essential to his work. At the time this poem was written (1970), both Robeson and his son, Paul Robeson, Jr., were alive; hence the designation "Sr."

The poem combines two biblical stories, the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus and the testing of Daniel's faith through his being cast into the den of lions.

- Ll. 1–2: "on the road...christians": Before his conversion, Saul was opposed to Christianity and did what he could to help eradicate it. He was chasing Jewish Christians who had fled to Damascus when he experienced his conversion. See Acts 9.
- L. 8: "I Am Paul": Paul was born into a Hellenistic Jewish family and given the Hebrew name Saul as well as the name Paul; he was a Roman citizen. Although his embrace of Christ's teachings and divinity did not in his own mind conflict with his Jewish faith, he is traditionally identified as Saul before the conversion and Paul after.
- L. 13: "red black and green songs": Especially during the 1960s, Black Nationalists began sporting these colors as a symbol of Blackness and Black solidarity. The origin of the colors, however, dates back to Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which was founded in 1914 and promoted the unification of all African peoples throughout the Diaspora. The UNIA's flag was red, black, and green.

"For A Lady of Pleasure Now Retired"

L. 23: "louvenia smiled": A reference to Giovanni's maternal grandmother, Emma Louvenia Watson (1898–1967).

"2nd Rapp"

L. 2: "rap": H. Rap Brown, now Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin (1943—). See note to "Detroit Conference of Unity and Art," page 369. Rap Brown went underground in 1970, the year this poem was published, because he had been charged with violating the terms of his bail and two of his friends had been killed in a suspicious explosion. He was arrested in 1971 after being wounded by police, stood trial in 1972, and began serving a prison sentence in 1973.

"Poem For Unwed Mothers (to be sung to "The Old F.U. Spirit")"

Giovanni was herself, of course, "an unwed mother," which subjected her to far more criticism than a "single mother" would receive today; she was, in fact, one of the first public figures who insisted on her right to control her life as she wished. She is certainly one of the women who changed the language we use to describe mothers who are unattached to their children's fathers.

"Ego Tripping (there may be a reason why)"

L. 12: "nefertiti": Nefertiti was one of the most celebrated of the ancient Egyptians, despite the fact that relatively little is known about her. She was the wife of King Akhenaten (1353–1336 BC) and with him raised six daughters. When one of the daughters died, the parents' mourning was depicted in wall paintings. Nefertiti disappeared from the court after her daughter's death. Her name means "the beautiful woman has come."

L. 24: "hannibal": Hannibal (c. 247–c. 183 BC) was a Carthaginian general and the leader of the march across the Alps. He was a precocious child, reputed to have begun at the age of nine following his father on campaigns.

"A Poem/Because It Came As A Surprise To Me"

L. 2: "saul": St. Paul. Paul was born into a Hellenistic Jewish family and given the Hebrew name Saul as well as the name Paul; he was a Roman citizen. Although his embrace of Christ's teachings and divinity did not in his own mind conflict with his Jewish faith, he is traditionally identified as Saul before the conversion and as Paul after.

"Oppression"

- L. 4: "mme. walker": Madame C. J. Walker (1867–1919), the first African American millionaire, made her fortune through hair-straightening and beauty products.
- L. 7: "APA to GDI": Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., a Black Greek fraternity originally founded at Cornell University, and "Goddamn Independent," the slang term for students in historically Black colleges and universities who do not join a sorority or fraternity. Although Giovanni eventually became an honorary member of Delta Sigma Theta, Incorporated, she was a GDI as an undergraduate.

- L. 9: "howard university": The first African American sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha, was founded at Howard University in 1908. There is fierce if good-natured competition between the AKAs and the Deltas, of which Giovanni is an honorary member.
- L. 13: "diana ross leaving the supremes": Diana Ross (1944—) was the lead performer of the Supremes, Motown's biggest female group. In 1967 the Supremes were renamed Diana Ross and the Supremes by Barry Gordy, head of Motown; in 1970 Ross left the group for a solo career.

"Toy Poem"

- L. 4: "loving rawls": Lou Rawls (1935–), blues and rhythm and blues singer popular in the 1960s and 1970s.
- L. 5: "st. jacques": Raymond St. Jacques (1930–90) was a stage and film actor who supported himself with menial jobs between acting opportunities. His big break was in the off-Broadway production of Jean Genet's *The Blacks*. His film credits include *Black Like Me* (1964), *The Pawnbroker* (1965), Cotton Comes to Harlem (1970), and *Glory* (1989), in which he played Frederick Douglass but received no screen credit.
- L. 22: "i wanna take you higher": "I Want to Take You Higher" is the title of a song by Sly and the Family Stone.

"Poem For Flora"

Flora Alexander was a close friend of Giovanni's parents.

- L. 6: "nebuchadnezzar": Nebuchadnezzar is the common misspelling of Nebuchadrezzar, king of Babylon from 605 to 562 B.C.E. He is credited with rebuilding Babylon—including the hanging gardens—as a wonder of the ancient world.
- L. 9: "shadrach, meshach, and abednego": In the Bible the three young friends of Daniel who were deported with him to Babylon by Nebuchadrezzar. They were cast into the fiery furnace, from which they emerged unscathed. See Daniel 3.
- L. 15: "Sheba": The unnamed (in the Bible) Queen of Sheba, ruler of the Sabeans, who were located in southwest Arabia, roughly where Yemen is today. She visited Solomon, the king of

Israel, and gave him many treasures. Tradition has it that she was African and that her relationship with Solomon resulted in a son who was the founder of the royal house of Ethiopia. See 1 Kings 10:1–13 and 2 Chronicles 9:1–12.

"Poem For My Nephew (Brother C. B. Soul)"

When he was young, Giovanni's nephew, Christopher Black, would sign his drawings "Brother C. B. Soul."

"Yeah . . . But . . . "

- L. 3: "diana": Diana Ross (1944—), who had left the Supremes for a solo career in 1970, the year this poem was written.
- L. 5: "dionne": Dionne Warwick (1940–), pop singer whose string of hits from her collaboration with Burt Bacharach and Hal David earned her multiple Grammys.
- L. 5: "making way for": Most probably a reference to the album *Make Way for Dionne Warwick*, released in 1963.
- L. 5: "just like me": From a line in Warwick's enormously successful "(They Long to Be) Close to You," which was included on *Make Way for Dionne Warwick* and recorded again for the 1972 album *Dionne*.

"Poem For A Lady Whose Voice I Like"

This poem was originally written for the singer and actress Lena Horne (1917-).

My House (1972)

With the exception of two poems ("Just a New York Poem" and "We"), written in 1970, all the poems in *My House* were composed between January 1971 and June 1972. In an interview Giovanni said that when she came to write this book she knew she wanted to do something different; she would not write any more "revolutionary" poems.

Between the publication of Re: Creation in 1970 and My

House in 1972, Giovanni traveled abroad for the first time, both to Europe and, more significant, to Africa. While she was in Africa, *Truth Is on Its Way* was released (July 1971) and became quite unexpectedly a huge success. The award-winning album presented Giovanni reading her poetry to the background of gospel music performed by the New York Community Choir. In July 1972, before *My House* was published, Giovanni read many of its poems to an audience of almost 1,100 people at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall. Her audience had grown considerably, then, by the time *My House* was published, a fact that is reflected in its initial sales, which surpassed those of the earlier volumes

The volume was divided into two parts: "The Rooms Inside," consisting of twenty-three poems on personal themes and arranged to follow the speaker's progress from childhood to adulthood; and "The Rooms Outside," consisting of thirteen poems on larger, more public themes, with the exception of the final, title poem.

"THE ROOMS INSIDE"

"Mothers"

- L. 10: "burns avenue": Giovanni and her family lived on Burns Avenue in Wyoming, a suburb north of Cincinnati, from about the time she was in kindergarten until about the end of her third grade year.
- L. 23: "samson myth": Samson's strength lay in his hair, which he told Delilah had never been cut. Delilah exploited his weakness with women both to cut his hair and to blind him. See Judges 13–16.

"A Poem for Carol (May She Always Wear Red Ribbons)"

- L. 3: "lincoln heights": Lincoln Heights was the all-black suburb of Cincinnati where Giovanni and her family moved in 1948.
- L. 4: "jackson street": Giovanni's parents first bought a house on Jackson Street in Lincoln Heights; later, they bought a home on Congress Street, just a few blocks from Jackson.

"Conversation"

This poem is clearly connected to the earlier "Alabama Poem" (see page 120), published in Re: Creation.

"Rituals"

L. 14: "chandlers": A chain store that sold inexpensive shoes.

"Poem for Stacia"

Stacia Murphy was an African American whom Giovanni met in Lagos, Nigeria. When Giovanni was unable to find a hotel room, Ms. Murphy let the poet stay with her.

"I Remember"

L. 11: "play ohmeohmy": "Oh Me Oh My (I'm a Fool for You Baby)" was an Aretha Franklin hit song included in her album Young, Gifted, and Black, released in January 1972.

"Just a New York Poem"

- Ll. 7–8: "women/in love": A 1969 film version of the D.H. Lawrence novel.
- Ll. 9–10: "The Spirit/In The Dark": The actual title of Aretha Franklin's 1970 album is *Spirit in the Dark*.

"The Wonder Woman (A New Dream—for Stevie Wonder)"

This poem looks back to "Dreams" (from *Black Judgement*, see page 67) and "Revolutionary Dreams" (from *Re: Creation*, see page 106).

Stevie Wonder had a female backup vocal group called Wonderlove, but Giovanni said she always thought of the group as the Wonderwomen.

L. 7: "sweet inspiration": The Sweet Inspirations were background singers for Atlantic Records. The lead singer was Cissy Houston (mother of Whitney); the others were Estelle Brown, Sylvia Shemwell, and Myrna Smith. The Sweet Inspirations, who did background vocals for many of Aretha Franklin's hits, sang

three-part harmony. See the reference to being a "sweet inspiration" in the earlier poem "Dreams."

"Categories"

In an interview Giovanni stated that she originally wrote this poem for Edie Locke, who was editor in chief at *Mademoiselle* magazine the year Giovanni won one of its Women-of-the-Year Awards (1971). Giovanni said she thought the surprise some people expressed at her winning the award was attributable to their habit of thinking in categories.

"Straight Talk"

Straight Talk was the name of a women's television talk show in New York City in the early 1970s. It was hosted by Carol Jenkins.

- Ll. 27–28: "the shadow/and the act": *Shadow and Act* is the title of a 1964 collection of essays by Ralph Ellison (1914–94).
 - L. 28: "essence": Essence magazine.
- L. 28: "encore!": From 1972 to 1980, Giovanni was a regular columnist for the Black newsmagazine Encore American & Worldwide News.
- L. 29: "the preceding . . . the letter E": This was a tag line used regularly by the children's television show *Sesame Street*.
- Ll. 33–34: "enjoyed waiting on/the lord": "Why Can't I Wait on the Lord" is the title of a gospel song by Harrison Johnson. It is sung as the background to Giovanni's reading of "Straight Talk" on her album *Like A Ripple On A Pond*.
- L. 38: "youth and truth are making love": A line from "Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin)," a 1969 hit single by Sly and The Family Stone.
- L. 45: "spear o agnew association": Spiro T. Agnew (1918–96) served as vice president under Richard M. Nixon from 1969 to 1973, when he resigned after being fined for income tax evasion.
- L. 46: "HEY! this is straight talk!": The television program Straight Talk ended with this line.

"Scrapbooks"

- L. 9: "green dolphin street": Title of a 1944 novel by Elizabeth Goudge.
- L. 10: "the sun is my undoing": Title of a 1944 novel by Marguerite Steen.
- L. 19: "jack and jill dance": Jack & Jill of America, Inc., a non-profit African American family organization aimed at improving the growth and development of children, ages two to nineteen.
- Ll. 32–34: "from the dean . . . fisk": Ann Cheatam, dean of women at Fisk University when Giovanni was a freshman, expelled her at the end of her first semester.
- L. 37: "grandfather graduated": Giovanni's maternal grandfather, John Brown Watson (1887–1962), was a high school Latin teacher who graduated from Fisk in 1905.
- L. 49: "miles davis record": Miles Davis (1926–91), trumpet player who had a tremendous influence on bebop and cool jazz.
- L. 58: "something cool": The title of a 1953 song and album recorded by the jazz singer June Christy (1925–90). Giovanni was a Christy fan during the 1960s and 1970s.
- L. 59: "tears on my pillow": A 1958 hit song that sold more than one million copies and ensured a career for Little Anthony and the Imperials.

"[Untitled] (For Margaret Danner)"

Margaret Danner (1915–82?), a Chicago poet, wrote Giovanni a letter expressing pride in Giovanni's work. One of the lines in the letter was "one ounce of truth benefits like a ripple in a pond." This line also provided the title for Giovanni's 1973 album, *Like A Ripple On A Pond*.

"My Tower (For Barb and Anthony)"

"Barb" is Giovanni's friend Barbara Crosby, who had a new son, Anthony.

L. 12: "black pearl of immeasurable worth": See Matthew 13:45–46.

L. 18: "harriet's route": Harriet Tubman (c. 1820–1913) was the most famous conductor on the Underground Railroad.

"Poem (For Nina)"

This is the second poem Giovanni wrote for Nina Simone (1933–2003), "High Priestess of Soul," musician, singer, and political diva. The other is "The Genie in the Jar," page 110.

L. 1: "in the castle of our skins": In the Castle of My Skin is the title of the 1953 autobiography by the Caribbean writer George Lamming (1927–).

"Africa I"

- L. 1: "kola nut": Two kola trees bearing nuts are found in Africa; the kola nut is used to make medicines and beverages.
- L. 9: "look ida": Ida E. Lewis (1935—), journalist, editor, and publisher. At the time this poem was written, Lewis was the editor of *Encore American & Worldwide News* and a good friend of Giovanni.
- L. 17: "john brown": Giovanni's maternal grandfather, John Brown Watson (1887–1962).
- L. 20: "accra": Accra, capital of Ghana and an important center in the gold and slave trade.
 - L. 25: "your mother": Africa.

"Africa II"

- L. 4: "cape coast castle": Cape Coast Castle, on the coast of Ghana, was an important holding fort of the slave trade. Africans would be brought from the interior of the continent to places like Cape Coast Castle, where they would be placed in dungeons until enough had been gathered to fill the hold of a slave ship.
- L. 5: "18th century clock": Evidence of the presence of a high-ranking British officer. See lines 13–15.
- L. 20: "there are thousands": A reference to Africans intended to be shipped as slaves to the New World who died in the horrible con-

- ditions that prevailed at Cape Coast Castle (and other holding forts).
- Ll. 22–23: "secret passageway . . . governor's quarters": African women awaiting transport in the dungeon were routinely subjected to rape by the British governor in charge.
- L. 24: "roberta flack recorded a song": Roberta Flack (1940—), pop singer who had several number-one hits in the 1970s, including "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face." While she was at one of the slave-holding forts on the African coast, she recorded a song (not commercially released).
- L. 25: "les mccann": Les McCann (1935–), jazz pianist and singer who also visited a slave-holding fort on the African coast.

"They Clapped"

- L. 9 "fanon": Frantz Fanon (1925–61), political philosopher, writer, and activist whose work on the effects of colonialism on Africa—especially *Black Skin*, *White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*—were highly influential.
- L. 9: "davenport": Giovanni does not recall whom she had in mind here, and I have been unable to identify a likely candidate.
- L. 10: "j.h. clarke's lectures": John Henrik Clarke (1915–98) was an important educator and writer and a prominent figure in the pan-African movements of the 1960s and 1970s.
- L. 11: "nkrumah": Kwame Nkrumah (1909–72), leader and later president of Ghana, the first sub-Saharan African country to gain independence.
- L. 11: "nigeria in the war": A reference to the thirty-month civil war in Nigeria, also known as the Biafran War (1967–70), triggered by the Eastern Region's declaration of itself as a separate state, Biafra.
- L. 20: "lagos": The former capital, largest city, and main port of Nigeria.
- Ll. 26–27: "sly and the family/stone": Sly and the Family Stone was an important singing group in the late 1960s; they brought together gospel, rhythm and blues, and rock.
 - L. 30: "james brown": James Brown (1933-), a.k.a. the God-

father of Soul and Mr. Dynamite, inventor of funk, and the most important contributor to and influence on soul music.

"Poem (For Anna Hedgeman and Alfreda Duster)"

Anna Hedgeman (1899–1990) was an educator and Civil Rights activist. She was the only woman on the planning committee of the 1963 March on Washington. Giovanni met Hedgeman when she visited Fisk University and came to a history class in which Giovanni was enrolled. Giovanni subsequently ran into Hedgeman periodically in New York.

Alfreda Duster (1904–83), daughter of Ida B. Wells, was a civic leader and social worker in Chicago. On a visit to Chicago, Giovanni met her, but only once.

"Atrocities"

- L. 1: "napalmed children": Newspaper and television images of children whose bodies were on fire from the napalm used so widely during the Vietnam War (1954–75) were common during the late 1960s and early 1970s.
- L. 4: "one president": John F. Kennedy (1917–63), thirty-fifth President of the United States (1961–63), who was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963.
- L. 4: "one nobel prize winner": Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–68) received the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1964; he was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4, 1968.
- L. 5: "one president's brother": U.S. Senator Robert F. Kennedy (1925–68), a presidential candidate, was shot in Los Angeles on June 5, 1968, and died the next day.
- L. 5: "four to six white students": Probably a reference to the May 18, 1970, incident at Kent State University, when four student protesters were shot and killed by National Guardsmen.
- Ll. 8–9: "c.i.a.... pull/the trigger on malcolm": Malcolm X, later Al Hajj Malik Al-Shabazz (1925–65), was assassinated on February 21, 1965, in the Audubon Ballroom in New York by gun-

men associated with the Nation of Islam; many people (including Giovanni) believed that an agency of the federal government, such as the Central Intelligence Agency, had played a role in his death.

L. 10: "eight nurses in chicago": The 1966 massacre of eight student nurses from South Chicago Community Hospital climaxed a life of violence and a three-month killing spree for Richard Speck (1941–91). Evidence suggests that Speck had murdered four other people in the three months leading up to the July 10 massacre.

L. 11: "sixteen people at the university of texas": Charles Whitman's 1966 killing spree was perhaps the first time Americans realized that public spaces are not necessarily safe. On August 1, 1966, Whitman made his way to the top of the Texas Tower on the University of Texas campus and began shooting at the people below; in his ninety-six-minute siege, he killed sixteen people and wounded another thirty. Immediately before he stood atop the tower, Whitman had killed his mother, his wife, a receptionist, and two couples he encountered on the stairs.

L. 12: "the boston strangler": Although no one was ever officially identified as the Boston Strangler, the general public believed that Albert DeSalvo was that individual. During the period 1962–64, thirteen single women from the Boston area were sexually molested and strangled in their apartments; the public felt that these murders were the work of the same individual. Despite the fact that DeSalvo confessed to eleven "official" Strangler murders, controversy continues about whether he was the real murderer.

L. 13: "john coltrane": John Coltrane (1926–67) was a jazz saxophonist, composer, and innovator who died of liver failure. Although there is no evidence that his death was from anything other than natural causes, Giovanni said in an interview that her "paranoia" has always made her suspicious of the early deaths of so many musicians.

L. 14: "sonny liston": Charles "Sonny" Liston (1932–70), heavyweight boxing champion who was knocked out in 1964 in the seventh round by Cassius Clay and in a 1965 rematch in the first round, this time by Clay with the new name Muhammad Ali.

- L. 14: "jimi hendrixs": Jimi Hendrix (1942–70), hugely successful rock star who died at age twenty-seven of an apparent drug overdose, but mystery still surrounds his death.
- L. 14: "janis joplin": Janis Joplin (1943–70), blues and rock and roll star who died of an accidental drug overdose.
- L. 15: "featherstone": Ralph Featherstone (19?–70), field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee who was killed on March 9, 1970, in a car bombing intended for H. Rap Brown; the bombing occurred outside the Maryland courthouse where Brown was to stand trial.
- L. 16: "che": Che Guevara (1928–67), Latin American guerrilla leader whose revolutionary theories became popular during the 1960s. Guevara was an important figure in Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution against Fulgencio Batista in Cuba. Guevara was shot to death by the Bolivian army in October 1967.
- L. 17: "agnew": Spiro T. Agnew (1918–96), formerly governor of Maryland, served as vice president under Richard M. Nixon from 1969 to 1973, when he resigned after being fined for income tax evasion.
- L. 20: "eugene robinson": According to Giovanni, Robinson was a police informant.
- L. 21: "eldridge cleaver": Eldridge Cleaver (1935–98), militant minister of information for the Black Panthers. Cleaver was wounded in a Panther shoot-out with police in 1968, jumped bail, and fled to Algeria.
- L. 22: "expel a martyr": An allusion to Huey Newton (1942–89) who with Bobby Seale formed the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, later known simply as the Black Panther Party. While Newton was in prison on a murder conviction that was later overturned, Cleaver took over the Black Panther Party. Cleaver was more militant than Newton and gained influence over the East Coast branches of the Panthers, while Newton was always based on the West Coast.
- L. 23: "The president": Richard M. Nixon (1913–94), thirty-seventh President of the United States (1969–74).
 - L. 24: "manson": Charles Manson (1934-) was convicted of

the 1969 murders of Sharon Tate and six other people. Although Manson did not commit the murders himself, his charismatic personality enabled him to convince others—his "Family"—to do so.

L. 26: "joe frazier": Joe Frazier (1944—), former heavyweight boxing champion. Frazier became heavyweight champion in 1970, in part, many thought, because of the absence of Muhammad Ali (1942—) from the boxing scene. Ali had been stripped of his title in 1967, when he refused to fight in the Vietnam War. His match with Frazier in March 1971 was his first fight after being stripped of the title, and Frazier won the fifteen-round match by unanimous decision. In two subsequent matches, Ali defeated Frazier.

"Nothing Makes Sense"

- L. 36: "aretha": Aretha Franklin (1942–), the undisputed "Queen of Soul."
- L. 41: "julian bond": Julian Bond (1940–) served four terms in the Georgia House of Representatives (1967–74) and six terms in the Georgia Senate (1975–87).
- L. 41: "rap brown": H. Rap Brown, now Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin (1943–). Civil Rights activist who became the chairman of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) after Stokely Carmichael left that post.
- L. 42: "nixon": Richard M. Nixon (1913–94), thirty-seventh President of the United States (1969–74).
- L. 44: "our man on the moon": Neil Armstrong or Buzz Aldrin, the first men to walk on the moon.

"I Laughed When I Wrote It (Don't You Think It's Funny?)"

- L. 2: "i guess negro": See note to "The True Import of Present Dialogue," page 373.
- L. 11 "shorter than hoover": J. Edgar Hoover (1895–1972), director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (1924–72), whose abuse of his powers, especially in matters regarding Black people, has been widely documented.
- L. 14: "rap brown": H. Rap Brown, now Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin (1943–). Civil Rights activist who became chairman of

SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) after Stokely Carmichael left that post.

L. 32: "interpol": The International Criminal Police Organization.

L. 46: "aretha franklin": Aretha Franklin (1942–), a.k.a. "Queen of Soul."

"On Seeing Black Journal and Watching Nine Negro Leaders 'Give Aid and Comfort to the Enemy' to Quote Richard Nixon"

Black Journal was a nationally syndicated black news program that began airing in 1968. In 1970 Tony Brown (1933–) became its executive producer and host and initiated numerous changes, including an emphasis on self-help, which generated criticism from many African Americans.

For the significance of the use of "Negro" in the title, see note to "The True Import of Present Dialogue," page 373.

President Richard M. Nixon accused antiwar protesters of "giving aid and comfort to the enemy."

L. 4: "steal away": The title of a well-known slave spiritual.

The Women and the Men

Published in 1975, this volume brought together many of the poems originally published in *Re: Creation* and nineteen new poems. *Re: Creation*, which had been published by Broadside Press, had a smaller distribution than Giovanni's other volumes, published by William Morrow. Many readers who had learned "Ego Tripping" from listening to the album *Truth Is on Its Way* did not discover a print version of the poem until its inclusion in *The Women and the Men*. The volume was originally divided into three sections: "The Women," "The Men," and "Some Places." These section divisions are not maintained in the present text, which provides only the poems new to *The Women and the Men*.

"The Women Gather (for Joe Strickland)"

Joe Strickland was a journalist murdered in Boston by a house burglar. His widow asked if Giovanni would write something for his funeral. Giovanni knew Strickland because he wrote for Encore American & Worldwide News, a magazine in which she was actively involved.

L. 18: "rooms facing east": Perhaps a reference to the prayer breakfasts held in the East Room of the White House by Richard Nixon during his presidency (1969–74).

"The Life I Led"

L. 22: "bombs not falling in cambodia": Cambodia, which in 1970 became the Khmer Republic, was a major battlefield in the Vietnam War (1954–75).

"The Way I Feel"

This poem provided the title for a poetry with jazz album Giovanni released in 1975.

L. 19: "roberta flack": Roberta Flack (1940–), pop singer who had several hits in the 1970s, including "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face." Flack also wrote the liner notes for Giovanni's album *The Way I Feel*.

"The Laws of Motion (for Harlem Magic)"

Esquire magazine originally requested that Giovanni provide words/dialogue for a series of paintings by a young painter. Harlem Magic was the name of the exhibition.

Stanza 5: "Professor Micheau": Lewis Michaux.

"Always There Are the Children"

This poem was written for the United Nations' first World Food Conference in 1974, held in Rome.

Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day

Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day was published on October 25, 1978, and its sales were quite strong. By the time it appeared, Giovanni had moved with her young son back to Cincinnati to help care for her father, who had suffered a stroke. The volume was dedicated to him.

"Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day"

Giovanni frequently describes the incident that gave rise to this poem when she reads it in live performances: One rainy day before she had moved to New York, she took her nephew, Christopher, to the Cincinnati Zoo. When they tried to buy some cotton candy, the vendor did not want to sell it because the rain would make it melt. The image and the vendor's denial of life's mutability stayed with the poet.

- L. 49: "as sweet as you are": "Stay As Sweet As You Are," written by Harry Revel and Mack Gordon, was in the film *College Rhythm* and was recorded by Ruth Etting in 1934. It was later covered by Nat "King" Cole (1919–65).
- L. 50: "in my corner": "Stay in My Corner" was a 1969 hit single by the Dells.
- L. 51: "just a little bit longer": "Stay (Just a Little Bit Longer)" was a 1960 hit single by Maurice Williams and the Zodiacs; it was subsequently covered by artists such as the Four Seasons, the Hollies, and Chaka Khan.
- L. 52: "don't change baby baby don't change": "Don't Change Your Love" was a 1968 hit single by the Five Stairsteps.

"Introspection"

L. 11: "Ian Smith": Ian Douglas Smith (1919—), former prime minister of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), fought against the forces of African nationalism and staunchly supported apartheid in South Africa.

"Forced Retirement"

- L. 31: "Namath": Joe Namath (1943–), football phenomenon who played for the New York Jets and, for one season, for the Los Angeles Rams; he retired in 1977.
- L. 31: "Ali": Muhammad Ali (1942–), heavyweight boxing champion (1964–67, 1974–78, 1978–79); he retired in December 1981.

"Boxes"

Ll. 26–27: "muhammad ali . . . leon spinks relieved him": Muhammad Ali (1942–) held the heavyweight boxing title three times: 1964–67, 1974–78, 1978–79; he lost his title to Leon Spinks (1953–) in February 1978 but regained it that November in their rematch.

"Poem"

- L. 20: "the president of the united states": Jimmy Carter (1924—), thirty-ninth President of the United States (1977–81).
 - L. 21: "Faith not deeds": Carter was a born-again Christian.
- L. 23: "larry flynt": Larry Flynt (1942–), head of the *Hustler Magazine* publishing company, was the victim of a 1978 assassination attempt that left him paralyzed.
- L. 42: "nixon": Richard M. Nixon (1913–94), thirty-seventh President of the United States (1969–74).
- L. 44: "humphrey's funeral": Hubert H. Humphrey (1911–78), thirty-eighth vice president (1965–69), was twice an unsuccessful presidential candidate, losing to Richard M. Nixon (in 1968) and then to Jimmy Carter (in 1976).
- L. 45: "opened his house": Richard Nixon's birthplace in Yorba Linda, California.
- L. 48: "anita bryant": Anita Bryant (1940–), singer, Miss America runner-up, and orange juice saleswoman whose antigay crusade in 1976–77 ultimately strengthened the gay rights movement and destroyed Bryant's marriage and career.
 - L. 49: "carter or nixon": See preceding notes.

Ll. 58–59: "city . . . garbage can": Perhaps a reference to the

"Fascinations"

L. 31: "con edison after all went out": A reference to the blackout in New York on the July 13 and 14, 1977.

"The Beep Beep Poem"

- Ll. 11–12: "understand . . . troopers": A reference to the May 18, 1970, incident at Kent State University in which four student protesters were shot and killed by National Guardsmen.
- L. 27: "encore american and worldwide news": The Black newsmagazine *Encore American & Worldwide News*, to which Giovanni was a regular contributor.

"A Poem for Ed and Archie"

Ed ran a lecture series at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and Archie was his student assistant.

"Poem (for EMA)"

EMA are the initials of Elizabeth "Liz" M. Armstrong, a friend of the Giovanni family.

"Winter"

L. 8: "Father John's Medicine": A cough medicine, the principal ingredient of which is cod-liver oil, once very popular and still available.

"A Response (to the rock group Foreigner)"

Foreigner was formed in 1976 as a collaboration between musicians formerly associated with other groups, both British and American. Their first album, released in 1977 and titled *Foreigner*, sold over four million copies in the United States alone. One of the hit singles on the album was "Cold As Ice."

"Being and Nothingness (to quote a philosopher)"

Being and Nothingness is the title of the 1943 classic work on existentialism by Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80).

"That Day"

Giovanni stated in an interview with me that this poem is written to the rhythm of a song by Johnny Taylor (1938–2000) entitled "Your Love Is Rated X."

Those Who Ride the Night Winds

Published in 1983, Those Who Ride the Night Winds marks Giovanni's innovation of a new "lineless" poetic form in which word groups are separated from each other by ellipses rather than line breaks. This new form retains the rhythmic effects essential to Giovanni's conscious use of the elements associated with an oral tradition; at the same time, it enables a more expansive treatment of subject matter than is generally possible in free verse. Giovanni has said that she developed this form to question the absolutism and complacency which she saw as characteristic of public discourse in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Of the twenty-nine poems composing Night Winds, twenty employ this lineless form, which she has continued to use extensively, while nine are written in the free verse characteristic of her earlier volumes.

The volume was originally divided into two sections: "Night Winds" and "Day Trippers"; "Love: Is a Human Condition" is the first poem of the latter section, which takes its name from the title of a hit single by the Beatles.

"Charting the Night Winds"

This poem constituted the preface of the original volume.

Stanza 4: "Telstar": Although Telstar was not the first communications satellite, it is undoubtedly the best known. It was launched on July 10, 1962, allowing live television from the United States to be received in France.

Stanza 5: "State to poison Socrates": The ancient philosopher Socrates (469–399 B.C.E.) was convicted of corrupting the morals of Athenian youth and espousing religious heresies; he refused all efforts to save his life and drank the fatal hemlock given him by the State. See Plato's *Apology*.

Stanza 5: "Copernicus to recant": Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543) is generally considered the founder of modern astronomy. He postulated that the earth rotates on its axis once a day, that it travels around the sun once yearly, and that the sun is the center of the universe. These ideas ran completely counter to the prevailing geocentric ideas of the Middle Ages. Copernicus did not recant; but he also had no interest in publishing his ideas because he was a perfectionist who thought he should test and retest his hypotheses. In fact, Copernicus died without knowing the repercussions of his work. Giovanni probably means Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), who subscribed to Copernicus's theory, ran afoul of the Inquisition, and was convicted of heresy. Not until 1992 did the Catholic Church, through Pope John Paul II, admit to error in its treatment of Galileo—but not to having been wrong.

Stanza 5: "McCarthy": Joseph R. McCarthy (1908–57), a U.S. senator from Wisconsin who gained notoriety for his witch hunting of suspected "Communists" from 1950 to 1954.

Stanza 5: "I am... many things": A line from Lewis Carroll's "The Walrus and the Carpenter" in *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1872).

"Lorraine Hansberry: An Emotional View"

Lorraine Hansberry (1930–65) was a Chicago-born activist and playwright whose *A Raisin in the Sun* was the first play by an African American woman to be produced on Broadway.

Stanza 2: "sculpt David": The statue *David* is generally considered the greatest work of Michelangelo (1475–1564), the Italian sculptor, poet, and painter.

Stanza 2: "like Charles White": The African American artist Charles White (1918–79).

Stanza 4: "from 1619": The first African settlers-numbering

twenty—in North America arrived on August 20, 1619, in Jamestown, Virginia, where they were exchanged by the Dutch ship's captain for food.

Stanza 4: "Little Linda Brown": Linda Carol Brown (1943–) was born in Topeka, Kansas. When she reached school age, her father, Oliver Brown, tried to enroll her in the all-white Sumner School, the school closest to their home. His name became the name of the plaintiff in what was to be the landmark case *Brown vs. Board of Education*, which challenged the structure of segregation first legalized in 1896.

Stanza 4: "Dr. King": Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-68).

Stanza 4: "in Montgomery": The Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955–56), which was sparked by Rosa Parks's refusal to move to the back of the bus provided the occasion for Dr. King's emergence as a Civil Rights leader. Because King was relatively new to Montgomery, having been appointed to the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in 1954, he was considered by experienced members of the NAACP such as E. D. Nixon to be an ideal leader for the boycott (he had no history with the city's white citizens). King was named president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, the organizational force behind the boycott. The boycott was ultimately successful, although not until the case had gone all the way to the Supreme Court, which upheld a lower court's order for the city to desegregate its buses.

Stanza 4: "Emmett Till": Emmett Louis Till (1941–55). Till, a Chicago boy who was visiting relatives in Money, Mississippi, was violently murdered and his body mutilated by Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam. When Till's mother, Mamie Till Bradley, decided to publicize the photograph of Emmett's body and to hold an open-casket funeral because she wanted "the world to see" what had been done to her son, the world "saw" and was outraged. Till was not the first victim of white southern racism, but he was possibly the most widely recognized, and his death galvanized the Civil Rights movement. The Montgomery Bus Boycott, which began in just months after Till's death in August 1955, was in some ways one of the results of that death.

Stanza 4: "Cuba . . . during the missile crisis": The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. After the United States detected the construction of missile launching sites by the Soviet Union in Cuba, President Kennedy ordered a naval blockade to surround Cuba until the Soviets agreed to dismantle the sites.

Stanza 4: "airlifted... to West Berlin": During the 1948–49 Soviet land and water blockade of West Berlin, the United States and other Western powers airlifted supplies to the city.

"Hands: For Mother's Day"

Stanza 3: "the mother of Emmett Till": Mamie Till Bradley Mobley (1922–2003). See note to "Lorraine Hansberry," above.

Stanza 3: "Nancy Reagan": Nancy Davis Reagan (1921–), wife of Ronald Reagan (1911–), fortieth president of the United States (1981–89). Shortly after he took office, he was shot in an assassination attempt; he recovered quickly.

Stanza 3: "Betty Shabazz": Activist, nurse, and educator, Betty Shabazz (1936–97) was present when her husband, Malcolm X, was assassinated in the Audubon Ballroom in New York City.

Stanza 3: "Jacqueline Kennedy": Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis (1929–94) was riding in the limousine with her husband, President John F. Kennedy (1917–63), when he was fatally shot. The images of his widow in a bloodstained pink suit and with her two small children at the funeral are indelibly etched in the memories of several generations of Americans.

Stanza 3: "Coretta King": Coretta Scott King (1929–), widow of Martin Luther King, Jr., has continued to carry out his mission since his death by assassination in 1968.

Stanza 3: "Ethel Kennedy": Ethel S. Kennedy (1928–), social activist and humanitarian, was widowed when her husband, the presidential hopeful Robert F. Kennedy (1925–68), was assassinated.

Stanza 7: "Star Trek's Spock": Spock, who has a Vulcan father and a human mother, was one of the most popular characters of the original *Star Trek* television series. He was played by Leonard Nimoy.

"This Is Not for John Lennon (and this is not a poem)"

Stanza 2: "it's not about John Lennon": John Lennon (1940–80), singer and songwriter who some would argue was the creative genius behind the Beatles, was shot and killed outside the Dakota Apartments in New York City.

Stanza 2: "the man who killed him": Mark David Chapman (1955—) came to New York from Hawaii with the chief aim of killing Lennon. After pleading guilty, he was sentenced to twenty years in prison.

Stanza 2: "Andy Warhol": American artist and filmmaker Andy Warhol (1928–87).

Stanza 2: "Our beloved mayor": Ed Koch (1924-) served three terms as mayor of New York (1979–89).

Stanza 3: "Newton": Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727), mathematician and physicist, one of whose laws of motion—"for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction"—is quoted later in this stanza. Tradition has it that Newton's conception of the force of gravity was the result of his seeing an apple fall in his orchard.

Stanza 3: "David Rockefeller": David Rockefeller (1915–), son of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., former president and CEO of Chase Manhattan, now a philanthropist and supporter of the arts.

Stanza 3: "Jerry Falwell": Jerry Falwell (1933–), is a fundamentalist and evangelist who initiated the Moral Majority and founded what is today known as Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia.

Stanza 3: "Chuck Willis": Chuck Willis (1928–58) was a singer and songwriter most often associated with the Stroll, a dance popular during the 1950s. He had a number of hit singles, including a pop version of the old folk song "C. C. Rider." He died from peritonitis following surgery for bleeding ulcers.

Stanza 3: "Johnny Ace": John Marshall Alexander, Jr., a.k.a. Johnny Ace (1929–54), popular rhythm and blues singer whose premature, bizarre death (reputedly an accident when he was playing Russian roulette) sustained his reputation long after he died.

Stanza 3: "Sam Cooke": Sam Cooke (1931-64) was a popular

and influential singer who emerged in the 1950s as a gospel star and then began recording popular songs, including the megahits "You Send Me" and "Wonderful World." His influence on soul music as well as on many of its best-known performers cannot be overstated. "A Change Is Gonna Come," recorded in February 1964, was his last great ballad. Controversy still surrounds his violent death.

Stanza 3: "Otis Redding": Otis Redding (1941–67), one of the greatest soul singers and songwriters of all time, was killed in an airplane crash in Madison, Wisconsin. Although some people aboard survived the crash, Redding and four members of his back-up group, the Bar-Kays, were killed; Giovanni has stated her belief that the crash was not an accident.

Stanza 3: "now we can call this game exactly what it is": Slight variation on a line from the hit song "Rock Steady," as written and recorded by Aretha Franklin. The original line is "Let's call this song exactly what it is."

Stanza 3: "Anybody want a ticket to ride?": "Ticket to Ride" was a 1965 hit by the Beatles.

"Mirrors (for Billie Jean King)"

The poem was occasioned by the 1981 palimony suit brought against the tennis star Billie Jean King (1943–) by her former secretary and lover, Marilyn Barnett.

Stanza 4: "only Dick and Jane": Dick and Jane was an illustrated book series used as standard school texts from which it is estimated more than eighty-five million people learned to read from the 1930s through the 1960s. The Dick and Jane texts presented a white, homogeneous, middle-class world in which nothing bad (and nothing exciting) ever happened.

Stanza 4: "Ozzie and Harriet": An ABC situation comedy that ran from 1952 to 1966, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* featured the real-life Nelson family. It was the television equivalent of the Dick and Jane primers.

Stanza 4: "Pillow Talk is only a movie . . . or a song by Sylvia": The 1959 movie *Pillow Talk* starred Doris Day and Rock Hudson.

The hit single "Pillow Talk" was released in 1973 by Sylvia Robinson under the name Sylvia. Robinson, who had appeared in the 1950s as one half of the Mickey and Sylvia duo, went on to create Sugarhill Records, which played a major role in introducing the world to rap music.

Stanza 5: "Like Humpty Dumpty": In the Mother Goose story, Humpty-Dumpty shatters when he falls—because he is an egg.

Stanza 6: "because he robbed . . . poor": The classic example is Robin Hood.

Stanza 6: "It Was A Mistake": When Barnett outed King through the palimony suit, King, who had kept her relationships with women private, initially acknowledged the relationship with Barnett but called it "a mistake." Not until 1998 did King publicly share her sexual preference, but she has since become an advocate for gay rights.

Stanza 8: "embraced . . . Medusa": In Greek mythology, Medusa was a beautiful young woman whose hair was her most remarkable asset. When she made the mistake of competing in beauty with Athena, the goddess transformed Medusa's hair into hissing serpents. Medusa became a monster so frightening to gaze upon that anyone who did was turned into stone.

"Linkage (for Phillis Wheatley)"

Phillis Wheatley (1753?—84) was born in the Gambia, West Africa. Because she was the first African American to publish a book, she is generally regarded as the founder of the African American literary tradition. A victim of the slave trade, she was brought from Africa to Boston, Massachusetts, when she was about seven years old. She was bought by John and Susanna Wheatley, who named her for the ship on which she had been transported. Although she was originally purchased to be a domestic worker, the Wheatleys recognized her aptitude for learning and allowed their daughter to tutor her.

Stanza 1: "leaving Senegal": During the transatlantic slave trade, the Senegambia region was an important source of slaves. It was subsequently colonized by the French and the British and evolved into two countries, modern-day Senegal and Gambia.

Stanza 2: "the children of Hester Prynne": Hester Prynne is the heroine of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* (1850).

Stanza 2: "The block . . . stood upon": The auction block.

Stanza 3: "Hagar . . . Abraham": Hagar, an Egyptian servant, was given to Abraham by his wife, Sarah, to be his concubine because Sarah was unable to have children. Hagar had a son, Ishmael, but when Sarah miraculously became pregnant and herself had a son, Isaac, she expelled Hagar and Ishmael from the household. See Genesis 16:1–6 and Genesis 21:8–21.

Stanza 5: "clitorectomies . . . infibulations": Female circumcision is still practiced in a number of African countries.

Stanza 6: "How could she . . . in this Land": Wheatley has sometimes been criticized for seeming to fail to express outrage at the institution of slavery; the specific poem suggested here is "On Being Brought from Africa to America." The recovery of her letters has made clear that Wheatley did in fact denounce and decry slavery but that her poetry was written with an understanding of the prejudices and power of the white audience who would read it. Giovanni, of course, is offering a different perspective altogether.

Stanza 6: "cheer George Washington his victory": In her poem "To His Excellency General Washington."

Stanza 6: "Harriet Tubman": Harriet Tubman (c. 1820–1913) was the most famous conductor on the Underground Railroad.

Stanza 6: "Sojourner Truth": Sojourner Truth (1797–1883) escaped from slavery and became an important preacher, abolitionist, and activist for women's rights.

"Charles White"

The work of African American artist Charles White (1918–79) celebrates Black Americans.

L. 31: "Johnetta": Johnetta Fletcher, niece of the family friend Flora Alexander and a childhood friend of Giovanni.

"The Drum (for Martin Luther King, Jr.)"

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–68). See also the earlier poems "Reflections on April 4, 1968" (page 49) and "The Funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr." (page 51).

Stanza 1: "The Pied Piper": The legend of the Pied Piper of Hameln comes to us from the Grimm Brothers as well as from "The Pied Piper of Hamlin" by the poet Robert Browning (1812–89), where Hameln is anglicized to Hamlin.

Stanza 3: "Kunta Kinte": The central character in Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976). Haley (1921–92) learned as a child that his family history included an African ancestor named Kunta Kinte.

Stanza 3: "Thoreau listened": Henry David Thoreau (1817–62), American writer and activist. In his most famous work, *Walden* (1854), Thoreau wrote, "Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer."

Stanza 3: "King said just say": King preached a sermon entitled "The Drum Major Instinct" on February 4, 1968, just two months before he was assassinated. Excerpts from it were played during his funeral service. The famous section from which Giovanni is quoting reads as follows: "Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice; say that I was a drum major for peace; I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won't have money to leave behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind." (From *The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986], p. 267.

"A Poem on the Assassination of Robert F. Kennedy"

U.S. Senator Robert F. Kennedy (1925–68), a presidential candidate, was shot in Los Angeles on June 5, 1968, and died the next day. See also the earlier poem "Records" (page 60).

In an interview with me, Giovanni stated that her poem had

been influenced by a poem by the Nigerian poet J. P. Clark (1935—). Quite probably this is the title poem from his collection *Casualties: Poems* 1966–68, which focuses on the Nigerian-Biafran War.

"Eagles (a poem for Lisa)"

The poem is for the daughter of Giovanni's good friend Lillian Pierce Benbow, fifteenth national president (1971–75) of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. Giovanni was inducted into the organization as an honorary member during Benbow's presidency.

"Flying Underground (for the children of Atlanta)"

This poem was occasioned by the Atlanta child murders of 1979-81.

Stanza 3: "if I was Tom... Sawyer": Title character of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, first novel by Mark Twain (1835–1910). In the second chapter, Tom is facing the chore of whitewashing the picket fence around his yard.

Beginning in the summer of 1979, when the bodies of two African American boys were found, fear spread through the black community in Atlanta. Not until two years and twenty murders later was the Atlanta Child Murder case officially closed with the arrest of twenty-three-year-old Wayne Williams, also an African American.

"Her Cruising Car: A Portrait of Two Small Town Girls"

The "Two Small Town Girls" to which the title refers are Giovanni herself and Frankie Lennon in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Stanza 3: "like Richard Nixon": Richard M. Nixon (1913–94), thirty-seventh President of the United States (1969–74), was forced to resign in August 1974 after three articles of impeachment had been brought against him because of his participation in a massive cover-up of illegal activities, including wiretapping and corporate payoffs for political favors.

Stanza 3: "John McEnroe": John McEnroe (1959—), winner of seven grand slam tennis titles, is perhaps best remembered for the temper tantrums he threw during matches.

Stanza 4: "Newton": Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727), mathematician and physicist, one of whose laws of motion is quoted here.

Stanza 5: "Darwin": Charles Darwin (1809–82), author of On the Origin of Species (1859).

Stanza 5: "Galápagos": Among the many places Darwin visited on his cruise of the South American coast and Australia (1831–36) aboard the H.M.S. *Beagle*.

Stanza 6: "going to St. Ives": A reference to the nursery rhyme "As I was going to St. Ives, I met a man with seven wives. Every wife had seven sacks, every sack had seven cats, every cat had seven kitts. Kitts, cats, sacks, wives, how many were going to St. Ives?"

Stanza 6: "traveled to Skookum": A reference to a children's story about a man who asks people along the way if they will keep his bag while he goes to Skookum; no one is willing, so he ultimately must carry the bag with him.

Stanza 6: "the Little Red Hen": A reference to the children's story of the Little Red Hen, who had to do all the work herself and could get no help from any of her friends.

Stanza 6: "the Engine That Could": The classic children's story by Watty Piper, first published in 1930, features a Little Blue Engine whose determination—"I think I can, I think I can"—enables it to climb impossible hills.

Stanza 7: "We were born . . . same hospital": Although Giovanni grew up in Cincinnati, she was born in Knoxville in Old Knoxville General Hospital. Her parents, Yolande and Gus, were good friends with Frankie's parents, Estelle and Dusty, who were, however, much more affluent than the Giovannis.

Stanza 9: "Thomas Wolfe was wrong": Perhaps a reference to the novel You Can't Go Home Again by Thomas Wolfe (1900–38).

"The Cyclops in the Ocean"

This poem was prompted by Tropical Storm Dennis in 1981, the first hurricane Giovanni experienced firsthand.

Stanza 1: "cyclops . . . meets no Ulysses": A reference to Ulysses' memorable encounter with the Cyclops in the *Odyssey*.

"Harvest (for Rosa Parks)"

Rosa Parks (1913—) is generally regarded as the mother of the modern Civil Rights movement because her refusal to move to the back of the bus on December 1, 1955, led to her arrest and sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., gained national recognition when he was asked to be the spokesperson for and leader of the boycott.

Stanza 2: "in Tuskegee": Mrs. Parks was born and spent her early childhood years in Tuskegee, Alabama.

Stanza 2: "married . . . at nineteen": Mrs. Parks married Raymond Parks, a barber, in 1932.

Stanza 3: "Colored people couldn't . . . No": These lines describe the realities of living in the segregated South.

Stanza 3: "My husband...belonged": Both Mrs. Parks and her husband, now deceased, became active members of the local chapter of the NAACP. Raymond Parks helped with the efforts in the 1930s to free the Scottsboro Boys.

In 1930 in Scottsboro, Alabama, nine black youths, ranging in age from thirteen to twenty-one, were accused of having raped two white girls on a freight train—despite the lack of medical evidence of rape. The first young man to be brought to trial was convicted, as were the others in subsequent trials. The young men had no legal counsel until the day of the first trial, when two lawyers volunteered. The Scottsboro case was appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court three different times between 1931 and 1937. In 1937, the Supreme Court reversed the earlier convictions of five of the young men, and by 1950 the others were free. Not until 1976 was the last one cleared, when Governor George C. Wallace signed the pardon for his having escaped while on parole in 1948.

Stanza 3: "Double Victory": "Victory at home and abroad" became a slogan among African Americans during World War II. It signified the fact that for Black Americans, who constantly strug-

gled against the violence bred by racism, there was a war in the United States as much as one abroad.

Stanza 3: "I was elected Secretary": Mrs. Parks served as secretary to the local chapter of the NAACP from 1943 to 1956.

Stanza 4: "Maxwell Air Base": Maxwell Air Force Base, just outside Montgomery, Alabama, is the national center of airpower education.

Stanza 4: "That Colvin girl had been arrested": In March 1955, Claudette Colvin, a fifteen-year-old high school student, had been arrested for refusing to give her bus seat to a white passenger. E. D. Nixon, president of the local chapter of the NAACP, with whom Mrs. Parks worked closely, decided against organizing a formal boycott around the Colvin case, but the group's leaders were waiting for the "right" test case.

Stanza 4: "forty years old": In December 1955 Mrs. Parks was actually close to being forty-three (her birthday is February 4, 1913).

Stanza 6: "If I have children . . . why I moved to Detroit": Mrs. Parks has no children. After the boycott ended her role in it made it difficult for her to find work, and Raymond Parks was ill. In 1957 the couple moved with Mrs. Parks's mother to Detroit.

Stanza 7: "other than her feet . . . were tired": In the mythologizing of Mrs. Parks's role, the notion emerged that she refused to move because her feet were tired; Giovanni finds this idea especially irksome.

"Reflections/On a Golden Anniversary"

This poem was originally written for Max and Dorian Washington, parents of Giovanni's friend Nancy Pate.

"Resignation"

Giovanni said in an interview with me that the rhythm of this poem is that of "Love Is So Simple," a 1968 song by the Dells from their album *There Is.* See also the explicit reference to the song in lines 47–48.

"I Am She (For Nancy)"

Nancy is Nancy Pate, Giovanni's childhood friend from Knoxville.

"The Room With the Tapestry Rug"

In an interview with me, Giovanni stated that this poem was for and about Miss Alfredda Delaney, Giovanni's English teacher for three years at Austin High School in Knoxville.

"Love Thoughts"

L1. 7–9: "Aretha . . . let me": "Ain't No Way," which was written by Aretha Franklin's sister, Carolyn, was recorded on the album *Lady Soul*, released in 1968.

"A Song for New-Ark"

This poem was originally written for the twenty-fifth anniversary issue of *NewArk Magazine*.

Occasional Poems

Broadside: "Poem of Angela Yvonne Davis (October 16, 1970)"

Giovanni wrote this poem to be sold as a broadside to help raise money for Angela Y. Davis's legal fees. The poem was a part of the international "Free Angela" movement, which erupted shortly after Davis was arrested in New York in October 1970.

Angela Davis (1944—) first gained public attention when her membership in the Communist Party was revealed and used as a reason for dismissal from her faculty position in the philosophy department at UCLA. She drew increasing attention when she became more active with the Black Panthers and with prison inmates, especially George Jackson (1941—71) and the "Soledad Brothers" at Soledad Prison. After Jackson was killed by prison guards during an alleged escape attempt, his brother Jonathan took guns from Davis's home and went to the Marin County Courthouse, where his attempt to take hostages ended in his own

death and the deaths of three other people. Davis had acquired the guns for self-protection after she received death threats; they were registered. Nonetheless, after the guns were traced to Davis, a federal warrant for her arrest was issued; she went underground before the warrant could be served. Despite the absence of evidence that Davis herself had committed any crime, the FBI placed her on its Ten Most Wanted list on August 18, 1970. She was found about two months later in New York and extradited to California, where she was charged with kidnapping, conspiracy, and murder, and put in jail without bail. She was eventually acquitted of all charges.

Giovanni was not actually to meet Angela Davis until 2001, at Toni Morrison's seventieth birthday party. But as Giovanni states in *Gemini*, "I fell completely and absolutely in love with the image and idea of an Angela Yvonne" (p. 71).

L. 8: "children in birmingham": A reference to the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, in which four young children were killed and twenty-one people injured. Birmingham was Davis's hometown, and she knew the girls who were killed.

Ll. 10–12: "schwerner,/chaney/and Goodman": Michael Schwerner (1940–64), James E. Chaney (1943–64), and Andrew Goodman (1943–64) were Civil Rights activists who worked in Black voter registration in Mississippi and were murdered by members of the Ku Klux Klan, with the complicity of law enforcement officers. After a massive search, including 200 naval personnel, their bodies were found buried not far from Philadelphia, Mississippi. Despite the fact that everyone—including the Federal Bureau of Investigation—knew who the killers were, it was three years before Neshoba County Sheriff Lawrence Rainey, Chief Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price, and five others were convicted on federal charges of violating the civil rights of the three. No state charges were ever filed.

L. 44: "betty shabazz": Hajj Bahiyah Betty Shabazz (1936–97), educator and widow of Macolm X, later Al Hajj Malik Al-Shabazz (1925–65).

L. 50: "no more forget that staccato": Betty Shabazz witnessed

her husband's assassination, which happened in view of a large audience at New York's Audubon Ballroom.

- L. 52: "jonathan's face . . . george's letters": Jonathan and George Jackson.
- Ll. 54–55: "Beverly/axelrod": Beverly Axelrod (1924–2002) was an activist and lawyer whose most famous clients were the Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver and Jerry Rubin, cofounder of the Youth International Party.
- L. 57: "water and sky and paris": Possibly a reference to the fact that Davis had spent her junior year (as a student at Brandeis University) abroad, studying at the Sorbonne.
- L. 59: "a german?": Possibly a reference to Davis's graduate study (1965–67) at the Johann Wolfgang von Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany.
- L. 97: "i went communist": Davis joined the Communist Party on June 22, 1968.
- L. 99: "why howard johnson's": During her two months of hiding, Davis stayed at a Howard Johnson's motel in New York City.
- L. 120: "harriet tubman": Harriet Tubman (c. 1820–1913) was the most famous conductor on the Underground Railroad. Her numerous forays into the slave states to help slaves escape made her indeed "the first/WANTED Black woman."
- L. 124: "but my helpers trapped me": Davis's companion while she was hiding proved to be a police officer.

"A Poem for langston hughes"

This poem was originally written for *USA Today*, in which it was published August 29, 1991.

"But Since You Finally Asked (A Poem Commemorating the 10th Anniversary of the Slave Memorial at Mount Vernon)"

This poem was written in 1993.

Stanza 1: "Jamestown . . . in 1619": The first African settlers—numbering twenty—in North America arrived on August 20, 1619, in Jamestown, Virginia, where they were exchanged by the Dutch ship's captain for food.

"Stardate Number 18628.190"

This poem was originally published as "Light the Candles" in Essence magazine's twenty-fifth anniversary issue, May 1995.

Stanza 3: "Precious Lord...take my hand": Classic gospel song written in 1938 by Thomas A. Dorsey.

Stanza 3: "Amazing Grace": Well-known song written by a former slave ship captain.

Stanza 3: "Go down, Moses": Well-known slave spiritual.

Stanza 3: "Marion Anderson": Marian Anderson (1900–1993), a Philadelphia-born singer, the first African American to perform at the Metropolitan Opera. In 1939 she drew national attention when the Daughters of the American Revolution denied her request to sing in Constitution Hall—because she was Black. Eleanor Roosevelt, then wife of the U.S. president, resigned from the DAR in protest. Subsequently Marian Anderson sang in front of the Lincoln Memorial on Easter Sunday, to an audience of 75,000 people.

Stanza 3: "Leontyne": Leontyne Price (1927–) is an internationally recognized diva whose opera career blossomed in the 1950s

Stanza 3: "Battle": Kathleen Battle (1948–) is a soprano who has appeared at most of the world's major opera houses.

Stanza 3: "Bessie": Bessie Smith (1894–37), "Empress of the Blues."

Stanza 3: "Dinah Washington": Dinah Washington (1924–63), one of the great blues singers.

Stanza 3: "Etta James saying At Last": Etta James (1938—) is a rhythm and blues singer whose career peaked in the 1950s and 1960s; one of her early albums is entitled *At Last*.

Stanza 4: "This is a bus seat": An allusion to Rosa Parks (1913—). See note to "Harvest," page 431.

Stanza 4: "telling young Alex": An allusion to Alex Haley (1921–92), who first heard of his African ancestors through story-telling sessions on long summer nights in Tennessee.

Stanza 6: "CC Riders": "C. C. Rider" is the title of an old folk song that was transformed into a blues song.

Stanza 7: "Peter Salem and Peter Poor": Giovanni means Peter Salem (1750?–1816) and Salem Poor (dates uncertain), both African American heroes in the Revolutionary War Battle of Bunker Hill. Peter Salem is credited with killing Major John Pitcairn. Salem Poor is credited with killing Lieutenant Colonel James Abercrombie; he was cited for heroism by some fourteen officers.

Stanza 7: "the 54th Regiment from Massachusetts": This all-Black Civil War regiment demonstrated unsurpassed courage in its unsuccessful assault on Confederate forces at Fort Wagner in 1863. The regiment is the subject of the 1989 film *Glory*.

Stanza 7: "Emmett Till": Emmett Louis Till (1941–55). See note to "Lorraine Hansberry," page 421.

Stanza 7: "Medgar Evers": Medgar Wiley Evers (1925–63), Civil Rights activist and Mississippi field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), was murdered in the doorway of his home in Jackson, Mississippi, on June 12, 1963.

Stanza 7: "Malcolm X": Malcolm X, later Al Hajj Malik Al-Shabazz (1925–65), was assassinated on February 21, 1965, at the Audubon Ballroom in New York City.

Stanza 7: "Martin Luther King, Jr.": Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–68) was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4, 1968.

"BROTHER BROTHER BROTHER (the Isley Brothers of Lincoln Heights)"

The Isley Brothers, whose father was a professional singer and mother was a pianist, began singing together in the 1950s. Initially there were four brothers: O'Kelly (1937–86), Rudolph (1939–), Ronald (1941–), and Vernon (?–1954), but the core of the group consisted of three after Vernon was killed in an automobile accident. In the mid-1960s, they were joined by their younger brothers Ernie and Marvin and their cousin Chris Jasper.

Stanza 2: "into the Valley": Suburban area north of Cincinnati.

Stanza 4: "progress is the most important product": Advertising slogan used by General Electric.

Stanza 7: "perfecting SHOUT": "Shout," a soul music single reflecting gospel roots, was released in 1959 and brought national attention to the group.

Stanza 8: "Joey Dee": Joey Dee and the Starlighters were a 'white rock and roll group that had two huge hits, "Peppermint Twist" and "Shout—Part 1."

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