

Poems by Amiri Baraka

A Toast

Mashed soul faces, and the faceless
who can arm or destroy, by their sullen movement
which is never real, until like the fool who
wanted the sea to rest, you try to stop it,
and the weight snaps off your head as simple
physical law. This is no metaphor, for the wishless
the wet men going home under girders. The men
who will never understand joy or joyousness
until the last pure freedom loving liar
is dead. Face down, wrapped in the movement
of the sea. Words rotting the shining bone.

(Previously unpublished, undated; probably mid-60s)

A Poem for Willie Best*

I

The face sings, alone
at the top
 of the body. All
flesh, all song, aligned. –For hell
is silent, at those cracked lips
flakes of skin and mind
twist and whistle softly
as they fall.
 It was your own death
you saw. Your own face, stiff
and raw. This
without sound, or
movement. Sweet afton, the
dead beggar bleeds
yet. His blood, for a time
alive, and huddled in a door
way, struggling to sing. Rain
washes it into cracks. Pits
whose bottoms are famous. Whose sides
are innocent broadcasts
of another life.

* Willie Best was a Negro character actor whose Hollywood name was Sleep'n'eat.

II

At this point, neither
front nor back. A point, the
dimensionless line. The top
of a head, seen from Christ's
heaven, stripped of history
or desire.

Fixed, perpendicular
to shadow. (even speech, vertical,
leaves no trace. Born in to death
held fast to it, where
the lover spreads his arms, the line
he makes to threaten Gods with history.
The fingers stretch to emptiness. At
each point, after flesh, even light
is speculation. But an end, his end,
failing a beginning.

2

A cross. The gesture, symbol, line
arms held stiff, nailed stiff, with
no sign, of what gave them strength.
The point, become a line, a cross, or
the man, and his material, driven in
to the ground. If the head rolls back
and the mouth opens, screamed into
existence, there will be perhaps
only the slightest hint of movement –
a smear; no help will come. No one
will turn to that station again.

III

At a cross roads, sits the
player. No drum, no umbrella, even
though it's raining. Again, and we
are somehow less miserable because
here is a hero, used to being wet.
One road is where you are standing now
(reading this, the other, crosses then
rushes into a wood.

5 lbs neckbones.
5 lbs hog innards.
10 bottles cheap wine.

(The contents

of a paper bag, also shoes, with holes
for the big toe, and several rusted
knives. This is a literature, of

symbols. And it is his gift, as the
bag is.

(The contents
again, holy saviours,

300 men on horseback
75 bibles
the quietness

of a field. A rich
man, though wet through
by the rain.

I said,

47 howitzers
7 polished horses jaws
a few trees being waved

softly back under
the black night

All This should be
invested.

IV

Where
ever,

he has gone. Who ever
mourns
or sits silent
to remember

There is nothing of pity
here. Nothing
of sympathy.

V

This is the dance of the raised
leg. Of the hand on the knee
quickly.

As a dance it punishes
speech. 'The house burned. The
old man killed.'

As a dance it
is obscure.

VI

This is the song
of the highest C.

The falsetto. An elegance
that punishes silence. This is the song

of the toes pointed inward, the arms swung, the
hips, moved, for fucking, slow, from side
to side. He is quoted
saying, "My father was
never a jockey,

but
he did teach me
how to ride."

VII

The balance.

(Rushed in, swarmed of dark, cloaks,
and only red lights pushed a message
to the street. Rub.

This is the lady,
I saw you with.
This is your mother.
This is the lady I wanted
some how to sleep with.

As a dance, or
our elegant song. Sun red and grown
from trees, fences, mud roads in dried out
river beds. This is for me, with no God
but what is given me. Give me.

Something more
than what is here. I must tell you
my body hurts.

The balance.

Can you hear me? Here
I am again. Your boy, dynamite, Can
you hear? My soul is moved. The soul
you gave me. I say, my soul, and it
is moved. That soul
you gave me.

Yes, I'm sure
this is the lady. You
slept with her. Witness, your boy,
here, dynamite. Hear?

I mean
can you?

The balance.

He was tired of losing. (And
his walking buddies tired
of walking.

Bent slightly,
at the waist. Left hand low, to flick
quick showy jabs ala Sugar. The righ
cocked, to complete,

any combination.
He was
tired of losing, but he was fighting
a big dumb "farmer."

Such a blue bright
afternoon, and only a few hundred yards
from the beach. He said, I'm tired
of losing.
"I got ta cut' cha."

VIII

A renegade
behind the mask. And even
the mask, a renegade
disguise. Black skin
and hanging lip.

Lazy
Frightened
Thieving
Very potent sexually
Scars
Generally inferior
(but natural

rhythms.

His head is
at the window. The only
part
that sings.

(The word he used

(we are passing St Mark's place
and those crazy Jews who fuck)
to provoke

in neon, still useful
in the rain,
to provoke
some meaning, where before
there was only hell. I said
silence, at his huddled blood.

It is an obscene invention.
A white sticky discharge.
"Jism," in white chalk
on the back of Angel's garage.
Hobbes staring into space. "Jasm"
the name the leader took, had it
stencilled on his chest.

And he sits

wet at the crossroads, remembering silently
each weightless face that eases by. (Sun at

the back door, and that hideous mindless grin.
(Hear?)

Rhythm & Blues (1)
(for Robert Williams, in exile)

The symbols hang limply
in the street. A forest of objects,
motives,
 black steaming Christ
 meat wood and cars
 flesh light and stars
 scream each new dawn for

whatever leaves pushed from gentle lips
fire shouted from the loins of history
immense dream of each silence grown to punctuation
against the grey flowers of the world.

I live against them, and hear them, and move
the way they move. Hanged against the night, so many
leaves, not even moving. The women scream tombs
and give the nights a dignity. For his heels
dragged in the brush. For his lips dry as brown wood. As
the simple motion of flesh whipping the air.

An incorrigible motive.
An action so secret it creates.
Men dancing on a beach.
Disappeared laughter erupting as the sea
erupts.
Controlled eyes now seeing now all
there is
Ears that have grown
to hold their new maps
Enemies that grow
in silence
Empty white fingers
against the keys (a drunken foolish stupor
to kill these men
and scream "Economics," my God, "Economics"
for all the screaming women drunker still, laid out to rest
under the tables of nightclubs
under the thin trees of expensive forests
informed of nothing save the stink of their failure
the peacock insolence of zombie regimes
the diaphanous silence of empty churches
the mock solitude of spastic's art.
 "Love." My God, (after they
scream "Economics", these shabby personalities
the pederast anarchist chants against millions of
Elk-Sundays in towns quieter than his. Lunches. Smells

the sidewalk invents, and the crystal music even dumb niggers hate. They scream it down. They will not hear your jazz. Or let me tell of the delicate colors of the flag, the graphic blouse of the beautiful Italian maiden. Afternoon spas with telephone booths, Butterfingers, grayhaired anonymous trustees dying with the afternoon. The people of my life caressed with a silence that only they understand. Let their sons make wild sounds of their mothers for your pleasure. Or drive deep wedges in flesh / screaming birds of morning, at their own. The invisible mountains of New Jersey, linger where I was born. And the wind on that stone

2)

Street of tinsel, and the jeweled dancers of Belmont. Stone royalty they tear down for new buildings where fags invent jellies.

A truth, a slick head, and the pink houses waving at the night as it approaches. A dead fish truck full of porters I ran track with, effeminate blues singers, the wealth of the nation transposed into the ring of my flesh's image. Grand dancers spray noise and disorder in these old tombs. Liverwurst sand -wiches dry on brown fenced-in lawns, unfinished cathedrals tremble with our screams. Of the dozens, the razor, the cloth, the sheen, all speed adventure locked in my eyes. I give you now, to love me, if I spare what flesh of yours is left. If I see past what I feel, and call music simply "Art" and will not take it to its logical end. For the death by hanging, for the death by the hooded political murderer, for the old man dead in his tired factory; election machines chime quietly his fraudulent faith.

For the well that marks the burned stores. For the deadly idiot of compromise who shrieks compassion, and bides me love my neighbour. Even beyond the meaning of such act as would give all my father's dead ash to fertilize their bilious land. Such act as would give me legend, "This is the man who saved us Spared us from the disappearance of the sixteenth note, the destruction of the scale. This is the man who against the black pits of despairing genius cried, "Save the Popular Song." For them who pat me in the huddle and do not argue at the plays. For them who finish second and are happy

they are Chinese,
and need not run these 13 blocks.

I am not moved. I will not move to save them. There is no
“melody.” Only the foot stomped, the roaring harmonies of need.

The
hand banged on the table, waved in the air. The teeth pushed
against
the lip. The face and fingers sweating. “Let me alone,” is praise
enough
for these musicians.

3)

My own mode of conscience. And guilt, always the obvious
connection.
They spread you in the sun, and leave you there, one of a kind,
who
has no sons to tell this to. The mind so bloated at its own judg-
ment. The
railing consequence of energy given in silence. Ideas whose sole
place
is where they form. The language less than the act. The act so
far beyond
itself, meaning all forms, all modes, all voices, chanting for safety.

I am deaf and blind and lost and will not again sing your quiet
verse. I have lost
even the act of poetry, and writhe now for cool horizonless dawn.

The
shake and chant, bulled electric motion, figure of what there will
be
as it sits beside me waiting to live past my own meekness. My
own
light skin. Bull of yellow perfection, imperfectly made, im-
perfectly
understood, except as it rises against the mountains, like sun
but brighter, like flame but hotter. There will be those
who will tell you it will be beautiful.

(From *The Dead Lecturer* (New York: Grove Press, 1964))

LEADBELLY GIVES AN AUTOGRAPH

Pat your foot
and turn
the corner. Nat Turner, dying wood
of the church. Our lot
is vacant. Bring the twisted myth
of speech. The boards brown and falling
away. The metal bannisters cheap
and rattly. Clean new Sundays. We thought
it possible to enter

the way of the strongest.

But it is rite that the world's ills
erupt as our own. Right that we take
our own specific look into the shapely
blood of the heart.

Looking thru trees
the wicker statues blowing softly against
the dusk.
Looking thru dusk
thru dark-
ness. A clearing of stars
and half-soft mud.

The possibilities of music. First
that it does exist. And that we do,
in that scripture of rhythms. The earth,
I mean the soil, as melody. The fit you need,
the throes. To pick it up and cut
away what does not singularly express.

Need.
Motive.
The delay of language.

A strength to be handled by giants.

The possibilities of statement. I am saying, now,
what my father could not remember
to say. What my grandfather
was killed
for believing.

Pay me off, savages.
Build me an equitable human assertion.

One that looks like a jungle, or one that looks like the cities
of the West. But I provide the stock. The beasts
and myths.

The City's Rise!
(And what is history, then? An old deaf lady
burned to death
in South Carolina.

(From *Black Magic: Collected Poetry, 1961-1967* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969))