

Runagate Runagate

I.

Runs falls rises stumbles on from darkness into darkness
 and the darkness thicketed with shapes of terror
 and the hunters pursuing and the hounds pursuing
 and the night cold and the night long and the river
 to cross and the jack-muh-lanterns beckoning beckoning
 and blackness ahead and when shall I reach that somewhere
 morning and keep on going and never turn back and keep on going

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Many thousands rise and go
 many thousands crossing over

O mythic North

O star-shaped yonder Bible city

Some go weeping and some rejoicing
 some in coffins and some in carriages
 some in silks and some in shackles

Rise and go or fare you well

No more auction block for me
 no more driver's lash for me

If you see my Pompey, 30 yrs of age,
 new breeches, plain stockings, negro shoes;
 if you see my Anna, likely young mulatto
 branded E on the right cheek, R on the left,
 catch them if you can and notify subscriber.
 Catch them if you can, but it won't be easy.
 They'll dart underground when you try to catch them,
 plunge into quicksand, whirlpools, mazes,
 turn into scorpions when you try to catch them.

And before I'll be a slave
 I'll be buried in my grave

North star and bonanza gold

I'm bound for the freedom, freedom-bound
and oh Susyanna don't you cry for me

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II.

Rises from their anguish and their power,
Harriet Tubman,
woman of earth, whipscarred,
a summoning, a shining
Mean to be free

And this was the way of it, brethren brethren,
way we journeyed from Can't to Can.
Moon so bright and no place to hide,
the cry up and the patterollers riding,
hound dogs belling in bladed air.
And fear starts a-murbling, Never make it,
we'll never make it. *Hush that now,*
and she's turned upon us, levelled pistol
glinting in the moonlight:
Dead folks can't jaybird-talk, she says;
you keep on going now or die, she says.

Wanted Harriet Tubman alias The General
alias Moses Stealer of Slaves

In league with Garrison Alcott Emerson
Garrett Douglass Thoreau John Brown

Armed and known to be Dangerous

Wanted Reward Dead or Alive

Tell me, Ezekiel, oh tell me do you see
mailed Jehovah coming to deliver me?
Hoot-owl calling in the ghosted air,
five times calling to the hants in the air.
Shadow of a face in the scary leaves,
shadow of a voice in the talking leaves:

Come ride-a my train

*Oh that train, ghost-story train
through swamp and savanna moving moving,
over trestles of dew, through caves of the wish,
Midnight Special on a sabre track moving moving,
first stop Mercy and the last Hallelujah.*

Come ride-a my train

Mean mean mean to be free.

Robert Hayden, 1962

For the Union Dead

Relinquunt Omnia Servare Rem Publicam.

The old South Boston Aquarium stands
in a Sahara of snow now. Its broken windows are boarded.
The bronze weathervane cod has lost half its scales.
The airy tanks are dry.

Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;
my hand tingled
to burst the bubbles
drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish.

My hand draws back. I often sigh still
for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom
of the fish and reptile. One morning last March,
I pressed against the new barbed and galvanized

fence on the Boston Common. Behind their cage,
yellow dinosaur steamshovels were grunting
as they cropped up tons of mush and grass
to gouge their underworld garage.

Parking spaces luxuriate like civic
sandpiles in the heart of Boston.
a girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders
braces the tingling Statehouse,

shaking over the excavations, as it faces Colonel Shaw
and his bell-cheeked Negro infantry
on St. Gaudens' shaking Civil War relief,
propped by a plank splint against the garage's earthquake.

Two months after marching through Boston,
half of the regiment was dead;
at the dedication,
William James could almost hear the bronze Negroes breathe.

Their monument sticks like a fishbone
in the city's throat.
Its Colonel is as lean
as a compass-needle.

He has an angry wrenlike vigilance,
a greyhound's gentle tautness;
he seems to wince at pleasure,
and suffocate for privacy.

He is out of bounds now. He rejoices in man's lovely,
peculiar power to choose life and die—
when he leads his black soldiers to death,
he cannot bend his back.

On a thousand small town New England greens
the old white churches hold their air
of sparse, sincere rebellion; frayed flags
quilt the graveyards of the Grand Army of the Republic

The stone statues of the abstract Union Soldier
grow slimmer and younger each year—
wasp-waisted, they doze over muskets
and muse through their sideburns...

Shaw's father wanted no monument
except the ditch,
where his son's body was thrown
and lost with his 'niggers.'

The ditch is nearer.
There are no statues for the last war here;

on Boylston Street, a commercial photograph
shows Hiroshima boiling

over a Mosler Safe, the 'Rock of Ages'
that survived the blast. Space is nearer.
when I crouch to my television set,
the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons.

Colonel Shaw
is riding on his bubble,
he waits
for the blessed break.

The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere,
giant finned cars nose forward like fish;
a savage servility
slides by on grease.

Robert Lowell, 1960

After Winter

He snuggles his fingers
In the blacker loam
The lean months are done with,
The fat to come.

His eyes are set
On a brushwood-fire
But his heart is soaring
Higher and higher.

Though he stands ragged
An old scarecrow,
This is the way
His swift thoughts go,

“Butter beans fo’ Clara
Sugar corn fo’ Grace

An fo' the little feller
Runnin' space.

“Radishes and lettuce
Eggplants and beets
Turnips fo' de winter
An' candied sweets.

“Homespun tobacco
Apples in de bin
Fo' smoking' an' fo' cider
When de folks draps in.”

He thinks with the winter
His troubles are gone;
Ten acres unplanted
To raise dreams on.

The lean months are done with,
The fat to come.
His hopes, winter wanderers,
Hasten home.

“Butter beans fo' Clara
Sugar corn fo' Grace
An fo' the little feller
Runnin' space.”

Sterling A. Brown, 1932

Slim in Hell

I

Slim Greer went to heaven;
St. Peter said, “Slim,
You been a right good boy.”
An' he winked at him.

“You been travelin' rascal
In yo' day.
You kin roam once mo';
Den you come to stay.

“Put dese wings on yo’ shoulders,
An’ save yo’ feet.”
Slim grin, and he speak up,
“Thankye, Pete.”

Den Peter say, “Go
To Hell an’ see,
All dat is doing, and
Report to me.

“Be sure to remember
How everything go.”
Slim say, “I be seein’ yuh
On de late watch, bo.”

Slim got to cavortin’
Swell as you choose,
Like Lindy in de Spirit
Of St. Louis Blues.

He flew an’ he flew,
Till at last he hit
A hangar wid de sign readin’
DIS IS IT.

Den he parked his wings,
An’ strolled aroun’,
Gittin’ used to his feet
On de solid ground.

II

Big bloodhound came aroarin’
Like Niagry Falls,
Sicked on by white devils
In overhalls.

Now Slim warn’t scared
Cross my heart, it’s a fac’,
An de dog went on a bayin’
Some po’ devil’s track.

Den Slim saw a mansion
An' walked right in;
De Devil looked up
Wid a sickly grin.

“Suttingly didn't look
Fo' you, Mr. Greer,
How it happens you comes
To visit here?”

Slim say—“Oh, jes' thought
I'd drop by a spell.”
“Feel at home, seh, an' here's
De keys to hell.”

Den he took Slim around
An' showed him people
Rasin' hell as high as
De first Church Steeple.

Lots of folks fightin'
At de roulette wheel,
Like old Rampart Street,
Or leastwise Beale.

Showed him bawdy houses
An' cabarets,
Slim thought of New Orleans
An' Memphis days.

Each devil was busy
Wid a devlish broad,
An' Slim cried, “Lawdy,
Lawd, Lawd, Lawd.”

Took him in a room
Where Slim see
De preacher wid a brownskin
On each knee.

Showed him giant stills,
Going everywhere,

Wid a passel of devils
Stretched dead drunk there.

Den he took him to de furnace
Dat some devils was firing,
Hot as Hell, an' Slim start
A mean presspirin'.

White devils with pitchforks
Threw black devils on,
Slim thought he'd better
Be gittin' along.

An' he says—"Dis makes
Me think of home—
Vicksburg, Little Rock, Jackson,
Waco and Rome."

Den de devil gave Slim
De big Ha-Ha;
An' turned into a cracker,
Wid a sheriff's star.

Slim ran fo' his wings,
Lit out from de groun'
Hauled it back to St. Peter,
Safety boun'.

III

St. Peter said, "Well,
You got back quick.
How's de devil? An' what's
His latest trick?"

An' Slim Say, "Peter,
I really cain't tell,
The place was Dixie
That I took for hell."

Then Peter say, "you must
Be crazy, I vow,

Where'n hell dja think Hell was,
Anyhow?

“Git on back to de yearth,
Cause I got de fear,
You'se a leetle too dumb,
Fo' to stay up here. . .”

Sterling A. Brown, 1932

Southern Cop

Let us forgive Ty Kendricks.
The place was Darktown. He was young.
His nerves were jittery. The day was hot.
The Negro ran out of the alley.
And so Ty shot.

Let us understand Ty Kendricks.
The Negro must have been dangerous.
Because he ran;
And here was a rookie with a chance
To prove himself a man.

Let us condone Ty Kendricks
If we cannot decorate.
When he found what the Negro was running for,
It was too late;
And all we can say for the Negro is
It was unfortunate.

Let us pity Ty Kendricks.
He has been through enough,
Standing there, his big gun smoking,
Rabbit-scared, alone,
Having to hear the wenches wail
And the dying Negro moan.

Sterling A. Brown, 1936

Gun/Woman/Son

His mother stands & pries the slug
from her brain. It's 1952. A bloodstain
crawls in sunlight down the wall,
glass melts on the floor. She shifts
the baby, my father, to her clean side
& drops the bullet in the ashtray beside her pipe.
The shooter runs, his gun shucked into high grass
like a crow with no beak. She looks
through the broken window catching the scent
of pine straw and clay...*all my life here*
& *I never noticed...*My father doesn't stir beneath
freckles of blood that will brown
by the time the blanket swaddles me,
but his face is twisted on the one dream
infants bring to the world. In it there is a river,
an oarsman with breasts, Indian-gray hair bound
by a red bow. His mother's wound
is a veil of roses. She turns from the window
holding her face in one hand, my daddy
in the other. There is no sheriff in this county.
I appear in the guise of an old farmer;
kiss the tip of her nose & place my father
in a peach basket. The day is ending,
the gunman halfway to Atlanta
with a satchel of hope. My father & I,
we just wait for the train. By Sunday we will be
different people. I will wake in the basket
saying, Daddy, tell me again how I was born.

Terrance Hayes, 2002

You've got to be taught

(from *South Pacific*)

You've got to be taught
To hate and fear
You've got to be taught
From year to year
It's got to be drummed
In your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught

You've got to be taught
To be afraid
Of people whose eyes
Are oddly made
And people whose skin
Is a different shade
You've got to be carefully taught

You've got to be taught
Before it's too late
Before you are six
Or seven or eight
To hate all the people
Your relatives hate
You've got to be carefully taught

Oscar Hammerstein II, 1949

Children will Listen

(from *Into the Woods*)

Careful the things you say
Children will listen.
Careful the things you do
Children will see and learn.

Children may not obey,
But children will listen
Children will look to you
For which way to turn
To learn how to be
Careful before you say
“Listen to me”
Children will listen.

How do you say
to your child in the night
“Nothing’s all black,
but then nothing’s all white”?
How do you say
“It will be all right”
When you know
that it mightn’t be true.
What do you do?

Careful the wish you make –
Wishes are children.
Careful the path they take –
Wishes come true,
not free.

Careful the spell you cast –
Not just on children.
Sometimes the spell may last
Past what you can see,
and turn against you.
Careful the tale you tell:
That is the spell
Children will listen

Stephen Sondheim, 1987

Riot

A riot is the language of the unheard.
—Martin Luther King

John Cabot, out of Wilma, once a Wycliffe,
all whitebluerose below his golden hair,
wrapped richly in right linen and right wool,
almost forgot his Jaguar and Lake Bluff;
almost forgot Grandtully (which is The
Best Thing That Ever Happened To Scotch); almost
forgot the sculpture at the Richard Gray
and Distelheim; the kidney pie at Maxim's,
the Grenadine de Boeuf at Maison Henri.

Because the “Negroes” were coming down the street.

Because the Poor were sweaty and unpretty
(not like Two Dainty Negroes in Winnetka)
and they were coming toward him in rough ranks.
In seas. In windsweep. They were black and loud.
And not detainable. And not discreet.

Gross. Gross. “Que tu es grossier!” John Cabot
itched instantly beneath the nourished white
that told his story of glory to the World.
“Don't let It touch me! the blackness! Lord!” he whispered
to any handy angel in the sky.
But, in a thrilling announcement, on It drove
and breathed on him: and touched him. In that breath
the fume of pig foot, chitterling and cheap chili,
malign, mocked John. And, in terrific touch, old
averted doubt jerked forward decently,
cried, “Cabot! John! You are a desperate man,
and the desperate die expensively today.”

John Cabot went down in the smoke and fire
and broken glass and blood, and he cried “Lord!
Forgive these niggus that know not what they do.”

Gwendolyn Brooks, 1969

They Feed They Lion

Out of burlap sacks, out of bearing butter,
Out of black bean and wet slate bread,
Out of the acids of rage, the candor of tar,
Out of creosote, gasoline, drive shafts, wooden dollies,
They Lion grow.

Out of the gray hills
Of industrial barns, out of rain, out of bus ride,
West Virginia to Kiss My Ass, out of buried aunties,
Mothers hardening like pounded stumps, out of stumps,
Out of the bones' need to sharpen and the muscles' to stretch,
They Lion grow.

Earth is eating trees, fence posts,
Gutted cars, earth is calling in her little ones,
"Come home, Come home!" From pig balls,
From the ferocity of pig driven to holiness,
From the furred ear and the full jowl come
The repose of the hung belly, from the purpose
They Lion grow.

From the sweet glues of the trotters
Come the sweet kinks of the fist, from the full flower
Of the hams the thorax of caves,
From "Bow Down" come "Rise Up,"
Come they Lion from the reeds of shovels,
The grained arm that pulls the hands,
They Lion grow.

From my five arms and all my hands,
From all my white sins forgiven, they feed,
From my car passing under the stars,
They Lion, from my children inherit,
From the oak turned to a wall, they Lion,
From they sack and they belly opened
And all that was hidden burning on the oil-stained earth
They feed they Lion and he comes.

Philip Levine, 1972

Caged Bird

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn
and he names the sky his own

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still

and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

Maya Angelou, 1983

Still I Rise

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

Maya Angelou, 1978

my dream about being white

hey music and
me
only white,
hair a flutter of
fall leaves
circling my perfect
line of a nose,
no lips,
no behind, hey
white me

and i'm wearing
white history
but there's no future
in those clothes
so i take them off and
wake up
dancing.

Lucille Clifton, 1983

from **Haiku: This Other World**

1

I am nobody:
A red sinking autumn sun
Took my name away.

31

In the falling snow
A laughing boy holds out his palms
Until they are white.

117

The crow flew so fast
That he left his lonely caw
Behind in the fields.

251

A rooster's sharp crow
Punctures a gray dawn sky,
Letting out spring rain.

312

How melancholy
These sweet magnolias
Cannot smell themselves.

647

Burning out its time,
And timing its own burning,
One lonely candle.

660

Between night and dawn
A plum tree apologized
With profuse petals

759

Like remembering
The hills are dim and distant
In the winter air.

Richard Wright, 1960/1998