

The Guarded and the Shame

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In early December 2013 and early 2014, Kwame Dawes and Andre Lambertson traveled to Jamaica to investigate the experience of people living with HIV/AIDS in the Christian church. What follows are Dawes's essay and cycle of poems—accompanied by Lambertson's photographs—that explore how this dynamic complicates Jamaica's cultural legacy.



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Jamaicans are primed to contend with all who speak ill of their country. As someone who grew up and lived in Jamaica until my midtwenties—although I now live in the US—I understand how the culture reacts to criticism. Anyone who visits Jamaica learns quickly that while it is fine for Jamaicans to lambast their country, to question

its leaders, and to complain about all the things that might be wrong there, it is certainly not acceptable for a visitor or an outsider to do so. Perhaps that explains why a siege mentality has overtaken many Jamaicans. They are fiercely proud of their nation and their identity and intensely committed to a culture of individualism rooted in the resistance of even a hint of external control and pressure. Moreover, they are deeply sensitive to any effort to disrespect or shame them because of their history of having to resist systematic efforts to control its people.

The legacy of slavery and colonial control has also left its mark. The impact moves even beyond slavery, to the period after colonialism when the consuming impositions of the Cold War attempted to dismiss national identities and agendas to ensure lockstep adherence to the polarized view of the world that characterized that era. This was never a casual matter of gentle influence, but actually came with the teeth of political infiltration, violence, instability, and economic bullying. Jamaicans clearly did not like what this looked and felt like in the 1970s and the 1980s, given the manner in which the country calculated and switched sides on such matters. This is what Jamaicans call “national pride.” But what is talked about less is the psychological nature of this pride. It is, at least according to some commentators and psychologists in Jamaica, predicated on the idea of shame.

To explore homophobia and HIV/AIDS in Jamaica, I had to delve into the Jamaican idea of shame and its cultural origins. To do that, I interviewed a practicing psychologist and pastoral counselor, Andre H. C. Davis, who has years of experience dealing with the complex psychological impulses of Jamaicans. As a Christian and a longstanding member of the church, Davis has developed positions about Christianity and its influence on the Jamaican psyche. It was Davis who drew my attention to this concept of shame as a defining and critical element in any discussion of homophobia and HIV/AIDS in Jamaica. He was not merely talking about the victims of these two realities, but the broader ways in which Jamaicans contend with aggression and any form of coercion or attack. As Davis noted, “I see shame as being an emotion that shuts down people. How we deal with each other I think this is part of our legacy from slavery.” Shame has its roots in Jamaican self-preservation, but Davis thinks it goes even deeper:

We’re driving on a highway, something traumatic or something significant happens, either some kind of public demonstration of shame, whether the person is called a name, or whether the person is treated a certain way, and the red light comes on. When the red light comes on you are not supposed to move, you have to wait before

the green light comes on, and a lot of times in the experience of our people the green light never comes on, so they are almost stuck in this place emotionally, and they are not able to move on.

For Davis, the red light is essentially the condition of tension, conflict, and the lack of resolution. In the face of abuse or attack, he sees that the long history of shaming has made Jamaicans especially prone to flare-ups that emerge as a way to deal with shame.



To Disclose or Not?: HIV and the Jamaican Church

from VQR

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The effort to promulgate the idea that Jamaica is a homophobic country is viewed by Jamaicans as a way for outsiders to shame Jamaica and Jamaicans. When criticized for its cultural homophobia—particularly violence against homosexuals—the immediate reaction is defensiveness. The accusation is sweeping, and the cultural impact is quite demeaning. Jamaica’s homophobia has even led to campaigns to have

gays boycott the country's tourist sector. In a largely successful series of measures, the efforts of gays in Jamaica and abroad have pushed some dance-hall deejays to reposition themselves vis-à-vis the singing of homophobic lyrics and to propose a more open attitude toward gay sexuality. By pushing concert halls around the US and Europe to not welcome certain Jamaican singers, Jamaicans have been hit where it hurts: in the wallet. But Jamaicans are always trying to add nuance to the idea of the country being homophobic. The list of defenses is instructive: Jamaica is a predominantly Christian country and Christianity has strong moral values, one of which is to care for those who suffer from HIV; Jamaica is not as homophobic as people make it out to be—many gays live openly in Jamaica and have not faced any serious discrimination; Jamaicans are just reacting to the imposition of an agenda on it by an external force; while there are some legitimate examples of violence against homosexuals, the truth is that most of the violence against homosexuals is done by homosexuals to one another; and the list goes on.

In each instance, these Jamaicans are trying to defend against the shame (often intended by the accusers, and often internalized by those accused—namely Jamaicans) of this imposed view, and in some instances react in the way that one sees in people like security guards—called “guardys” in the Jamaican vernacular—who are typically thought of as holding low-status positions. However, these guardys seem to be expected—with their ill-fitting uniforms, batons, and cell phones—to keep order in a society that thinks of itself as free of order. Yet guardys are charged with maintaining order but are given none of the tools one might need to do so. The result is a kind of edginess that normally prevails in the life of Jamaicans, and it demands certain kinds of responses on the part of the population because of the shame associated with this power paired with powerlessness.

It is hard to determine whether this edginess, this peculiar disquiet, is entirely a historical phenomenon, or whether it is a condition, forged in the past, that begins to reemerge during periods of stress and hardship. There is a tendency to not want to suggest that the edginess that exists in Jamaica today has its roots in four hundred years of calculated, systematic violence enacted as a way to control a society. On several occasions during my recent visits to Jamaica, I was struck by a peculiar sense of caution in the security guards around the city. These are underpaid, overworked people with relatively low levels of skill, who have come to proliferate the cities, in car parks, garages, schools, churches, restaurants, fast-food chains, apartment complexes, stores, gas stations—virtually everywhere that might be termed a place of commerce or a place where people gather in great numbers. There is a uniformed guard managing the gate, managing the key to the rest room, managing the key to every possible area of egress and regress in the area.

The guardy subculture is a fascinating Jamaican phenomenon because it is a reflection of the country's anxiety about crime and violence, even as it is a reflection of the high levels of unemployment for unskilled workers. Watchmen, guardys, gatemen, and caretakers are all part of this subculture. They range in the position within society, in the extent of training they receive, and in the kind of pay they receive, but they remain at the bottom of the hierarchical system of security in Jamaica. Whether the guardy or watchman is someone hired informally or is a part of an agency, that guardy remains someone who is given responsibility often without the authority and power to fulfill that responsibility.

This subculture exists as a result of the pressures of living in a society that by any standards could be called a violent one in which the levels of crime are cause for constant commentary and initiatives by the government about how to reduce the rates. Jamaicans are concerned about the level of violence in the country, and with a murder rate that annually tops 1,100 people even after a three-year decline (Jamaica's population is close to 3 million people), a culture of vigilance against the possibility of victimization is inevitable. Yet even with the threat of violence, these guardys are often not armed with weapons but only have a baton and a cell phone. They are, therefore, not likely to be extremely helpful if armed gunmen—who abound in Jamaica—attempt to attack a place. Their job is to set off the alarm and warn the vulnerable that an attack is eminent. Unfortunately, they are often the first suspects when there is a home invasion or a burglary. They are often viewed as people who could easily be in cahoots with the criminals, and so their position is marked by a painful catch-22. If they escape harm during a robbery or an attack, they are seen as suspects. And if they are hurt or killed during their attack, they are regarded as inept and useless in carrying out their jobs.

Next in line are the much-maligned police. The constabulary has a long history of being the bastion and lackeys of the Babylonian system of oppression in Jamaica. They are close to the people and they are familiar to the people and they work and live among the people and so are easily corrupted, easily accessible, and ultimately highly resented by the community. The police officer, however, has several things going for him or her. These people are armed, and they are known to use their arms indiscriminately and with lethal and brutal intent. The police are also part of a crowd of people who feel a strong affinity to one another and who will protect one another under most circumstances. People may not respect the police, but they fear them. Below the police are a new phenomenon—independent security companies that provide armed security for businesses and residents in the country. Like their equivalent in the mercenary industry in the military, these people work within and outside the law. They get things done. People worry about them, considering them

dangerous but extremely necessary forces. And it is below this class of security that we find the hapless guardy. So given these circumstances, and given the level of abuse that the guardy must undergo, it is no surprise that the guardy, as a classic Jamaican figure, is primed for confrontation, positioned for the kind of exchange that can only be called aggressive and unfriendly.

The complex of guardedness and aggression that can emerge in exchanges with these men and women can, in some ways, be connected to the dynamic at work among many Jamaican ministers who regard the stamp of homophobia as an attack on Jamaica by a force that they regard as aggressive, imperialist, and determined to undermine the national pride of the Jamaican people. They therefore anticipate that anyone who challenges attitudes toward homosexuality represents those forces that are working against Jamaican culture and the clarity of Jamaica's spiritual commitment to the principles of Christianity. There is a view that the forces that are seeking the abolition of the buggery laws in Jamaica, for instance, are part of a foreign invasion that seeks to impose Western attitudes on a Jamaican cultural fabric that has strong and persistent Christian views. For many, the decriminalization of homosexual acts in Jamaica is merely a Trojan horse of sorts—it seems like a fairly reasonable position of humanitarian importance, but behind it is something bigger, something that will presage the dismantling of Christian values in the country and that will become a larger attack on conventional Christian marriage. The language should be familiar to Americans who continue to discuss gay marriage, for instance, in such terms. Jamaicans who care about their nation, the argument goes, must halt the process now before they find themselves discussing the legalization of gay marriage, or worse, the persecution of Christian ministers and Christians in general who voice even the slightest objection to homosexuality. Liberal views on homosexuality from Europe and North America constitute a new imperialism that proud Jamaicans must resist.

In analyzing this phenomenon, Dr. Garnett Roper, president of the Jamaica Theological Seminary, offers that there is a profound irony attached to this situation, one that is inextricably linked to the economic connection between many of these Christian churches in Jamaica and American evangelical churches of the conservative persuasion. Roper has exactly the kind of nuanced and complicated position that marks the views of even the more liberal of Jamaican church leaders. Roper calls himself a realist. Gay Jamaicans, he says, constitute 9 to 10 percent of the population, about 300,000 people. They are not going away even if he, like others, would rather that they did.



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For Roper, of course, the war against homosexuality in a homophobic country is futile and pointless. The battle of the culture has already been won, he contends: “And I have had the rabid churchgoer who sees blood, who calls you everything if you disagree with him, and I just think it’s a noise that is going to end like Prohibition, yeah? It’s a chicken that had its head cut off, it’s—rigor mortis is about to set in, it’s not going very much farther.” Given the size of the gay population, Roper believes laws against homosexuality are futile. “We don’t have enough prisons to put them in. And, therefore, a little bit of realism has to take hold. We—I—might wish that homosexuality will go away, it’s been around a very long time, like prostitution, it may be around for a bit longer. So how do I mainstream him so that he isn’t a threat because his behavior is underground to the rest of the public? That’s what I think we have to do.”

Roper is against the criminalization of homosexual behavior, but he also sees the behavior as dangerous in the way that smoking is dangerous and unhealthy, and his pragmatism is quite counter-conservative. Consequently, what he is arguing for is the “mainstreaming” of homosexuals so that they do not have to go underground.

He is, however, explicit and critical of the ways in which the practices of the church in Jamaica are shaped by the work of American evangelicals. An under-investigated connection between the growth and the nature of these evangelical churches in Jamaica, in the replication of the patterns of television-gospel entities, and in the rise of the concepts around the mega-church are not unrelated to a broader global church phenomenon that is driven by the distribution of “missionary” support that grants many of the leaders in these congregations financial security. This particular brand of American evangelism is distinguished by the manner in which it seeks to inculcate in these societies middle-class American cultural values of wealth, reward, and cultural conservatism that is not necessarily linked to biblical principles. The discourse is capitalist without an admission that it represents an ideological positioning rather than a theological positioning. For Roper, the power of financial support is what these American churches use to dictate the behavior of the churches in countries such as Jamaica that depend on them for support. It is not accidental that some of the most vocal anti-gay appeals come from churches that have built whole theologies around the doctrine of faith-giving and prosperity—a theology that more often than not equates words like “blessing” and “favor” with financial wealth. The logic is simple: America is a wealthy nation because God has blessed her. Jamaica can become wealthy if it embraces the values of the conservative American culture that won it its blessing from God. In that narrative, it should be noted, the “Christian” founding fathers of the US played a major role in winning God’s blessings.

In many of these churches, homosexuality is a flash point, the source of enthusiastic approbation that alarms and inflames these congregations. In many ways, he argues, there is a branding that depends on flying the flag on anti-homosexual views that are consistent with the conservative ideas passed on to these churches by the influence of conservative churches abroad:

But Jamaica is a homophobic society, and the fear of the religious conservatism, of the religious conservative groups, that to amend the buggery laws, for example, to decriminalize homosexuality or a same-sex relationship, the fear that that is not all that that does. It is, too, a thin edge of the wedge. This is the way that insecure positions are usually argued. But it’s important that I admit to the following: that the energy that an anti-homosexual campaign generates is without parallel in other sections of the Church. Nothing fires them up more than the quarrel about homosexuals. And that is tragic just because they are such a vulnerable minority that ought to be protected, if we properly define our role, our primary target for ministry. But that’s how they see it. It is part of the cultural wars of North America, so conservative movements get funding by raising the red flag of abortion and homosexuality, and they need that largesse in order to live. They won’t admit it, but

the thing is, if you want to get in print, say something silly, right? Or say something old. Then you get in, and after a while you don't know that people are laughing at you rather than reading you, but you're in.

It would seem reasonable to question the extent to which the anti-homosexual rhetoric is entirely a product of American evangelical church views, given the fact that there has long been a quite homegrown position against homosexuality that found great currency in the popular culture at the time of the rise of dancehall culture in the eighties and early nineties. Nonetheless, it is clear that Roper's argument that the perpetuation of these views in the context of the church has a great deal to do with this peculiar relationship and the attendant branding that has come from it. After all, as tempting as it might seem, one can overplay the extent to which the dancehall culture shapes and defines the broader values of Jamaican society, since, in and of itself, the dancehall culture is shunned by the Jamaican church and rarely regarded as a bastion of Christian values and attitudes. Dancehall culture, for the vast majority of the Jamaican church, is sinful and "worldly" culture. So to presume that because a dancehall artist champions, in song, the murder of homosexuals, it means that Jamaican Christians share this view, represents a gross misunderstanding of the nature of the society and the position of the church in that society.

For Roper, the shelf life of this anti-gay effort is quite limited. He estimates that in ten years it will have no currency. Indeed, he suggests that its currency is already fading. However, he is clear that the matter of creating a brand of distinction is inextricably tied to the persistence of these attitudes. For him, though, a wonderful jujitsu of intellectual nimbleness takes place around this issue. At stake is not the morality of the gospel in that conventional sense of sin and holiness, but a theology of political liberation that is fully rooted in anti-imperialist efforts. In many ways, then, the willingness to make mainstream the homosexual life is a combination of pragmatism and anti-imperialist discourse:

I've had to relate to people who are [gay], and I've had to be their pastor. The ministry of compassion is not limited to who I think the person needing compassion is, and I'm not saying the homosexual needs compassion just because he's homosexual, but just because he's a minority in the society. So all of that contributes to brand, and all of that becomes a new form of resisting colonization, even at the same time as carrying an imperialist agenda because it's the agenda [laughs]—you're carrying the agenda of the culture wars at the same time you're standing in the name of national freedom. But I think it doesn't have ten years left in it. It will blow over.

The “it” here is the criminalization of homosexuality and the passionate and virulent homophobia at work in many of the churches. But as is clear here, Roper is also of the view that those church leaders who still struggle to express compassion and care for people living with HIV/AIDS—as well as those who find themselves unwilling to give up the moral ground they feel they must protect for fear of what will happen if they do not hold on to it—will then become condoners of the sins that they believe are consuming their society and their members. What Roper manages in his analysis of the way Jamaican society works morally and the way that something such as homosexuality has to be negotiated by the church is remarkable and insightful for its rhetorical efficiency and complexity. For Roper, compassion is necessary, but it is the kind of compassion that has to be viewed in light of the ways in which the society handles shame. When I asked him directly about shame as a way of organizing society, his response located what he saw as the nature of power in society and the role of the church in negotiating such power:

There are powers in the society: Death is a power, violence is a power, money is a power, and shame is a power. So, the power to shame is something which is overused in contexts like ours. Now, it isn't evenly used, you see. If the society had a kind of enlightened moral sense and everything that crosses the moral line is shamed, it would be an effective tool of socialization—you create a moral conservatism, at the same time a moral clarity. It has become oppressive. So if you have a murderer, who is at the same time liked by the society, murder all of a sudden is a nuisance, it's not a real crime. There is no shame uniformly directed at the gunman or the murderer. It really depends on who the bad boy is. In that context, you pick the people who are the weak, the most vulnerable, and you heap your condemnation on them. And you only do that until you know somebody, whom you like, who becomes one of them. Then you dilute this power called shame. So I have learned that in ministry, one of the great tools, *the* great tool, is acceptance—accepting each other as Christ has accepted you. So, I just reach out, you know. I'm not judging you for anything, I'm just here in solidarity, and I will speak for you. I'll speak with you. And I'll speak of you in a good way. And sometimes people have to put their bodies between the society and those who are the victims of shaming. You have to let them touch you and let them risk contamination. And you see all of this hiding behind buggery laws and homophobia. It's really about a refusal to be in solidarity with the vulnerable. “I hold my moral commitments; they remain what they are.” They don't change. But that don't change me from, or inhibit me in being a minister, or a brother, or in solidarity with the most reviled. And I think we have to get past this—the fact that somebody with HIV and AIDS is a victim.

Roper believes Jamaican society must get past thinking of those with HIV/AIDS as victims, “even if they are a victim of their own silliness alone, which is not likely. They are a victim, they need the society to create a space for them.” This is a response to another kind of shaming—the shaming of the international world on Jamaica. Those who accuse these people of being insensitive and homophobic and who brand the whole nation as such, are in fact declaring a kind of war, and they are quite blatantly disrespecting the Jamaican. The Jamaican has been known for many things but one that is quite well known is their capacity to fight. Thus even as they react defensively to the accusation, they feel the need to impose the censure of shame on the most vulnerable in society. Like the guardy, they do so by holding on to those areas over which they have power, and they do so also in the face of their helplessness in the face of these issues.

In the meantime, many churches are calling for action and training. The United Theological College of the West Indies has introduced a unit on HIV/AIDS in their attempt to sensitize pastors to the challenges of ministering in the church. At the same time, many congregations are formulating policies for the church to assume a proactive role in proposing a new approach to the issue of HIV/AIDS from the position of compassion and care.



When combined with the complications of shame as a product of the history of oppression and repression, and even as the system of shame becomes the power that people exercise against one another, and that the powerful exercise against the vulnerable, there is a way in which one can understand the challenge of dealing with HIV/AIDS in the church as being directly connected to the issue of shame. The person who has contracted the disease is ashamed of the quite apparent fact that the disease was contracted through an act that the church would regard as aberrant and sinful, whether they committed the act themselves, or someone they trusted, like a spouse or a partner, did. The sickness is a stamp of punishment—tangible and thorough—for these transgressions. Further, there is a sense in which the person living with the disease is branded by something that makes him or her dangerous, capable of poisoning others with this touch of death. Thus, while sickness in and of itself does not elicit a feeling of shame, when found in a disease like HIV/AIDS, which is associated with abhorrent sexual behavior, the practices and acts of those in the margins of society, and the secretive and taboo-breaking acts of the deviant, the shame becomes significant.

This is compounded by the fact that there already exists in the memory of the society an anxiety about the scourge of AIDS as an incurable disease. While people are aware of the developments of treatment that make the disease no longer an automatic and immediate death sentence, the memory of HIV/AIDS as a disease that has wiped out millions in Africa, and that has been seen as a dangerous ailment that can attack the fabric of a society, adds to its association with something shameful and worthy of being hidden. The argument goes that even if someone does not contract the disease through homosexual contact, the trail back to so-called homosexual deviance is determined as so short that its stain tarnishes anyone who has contracted the disease.

There are church leaders who have thought carefully about the issues of shame, status, and violence, and have seen the complicated relationship between the fact of HIV/AIDS and the moral and cultural issues that surround it. They recognize that anxiety among many Christian leaders that perhaps if they show compassion for those who are living with the disease, they may well be endorsing and condoning what they imagine to be the behavior that may have led to the disease. Reverend Stephen Jennings describes this phenomenon as the conceding of moral territory. The problem unfolds like this: In an effort to show Christian care and kindness, the Christian stands in danger of being seen as endorsing the sin of the person and in so doing, conceding the moral ground that states that the acts leading to the disease are wrong. The Christian, then, in the cultural wars, loses the battle, having caused the sinner to feel as if his or her sins are being condoned. These leaders have concluded that above everything, the Christian response is first to embrace, to touch, to shelter,

to protect, and to give succor to those who are vulnerable and those who are carrying the disease. This, they argue, is the first moral imperative. Anything else is secondary. This first impulse, they argue, constitutes the only legitimate Christian response. The idea is to meet people at the point of their need and to find a way to give comfort to them in the midst of their need. I met many ministers who held to this view, but they all agreed that this was not a view that all their colleagues shared. They all conceded that there is still a long way to go and that far too many of their peers are not prepared to cede the moral ground, as they fear what will come next.

When We Pray

And these are the uses of prayer,
that earnest gesture of closed eyes,
so tight we see the bright darting
of spirits shatterings of gold
and red; after a while we no longer
hear the soft hiccups in the closed
room, and we ask that this will
pass, that this stone sitting
before us will pass, that this
rotting will pass, that this
confounding bewilderment will
pass. These are ways to stand
in the shadows, to see the open maw
to the grotto ahead, to turn to prayer,
to close away the demons,
to know that the eyes opened
will reveal a dawn and all
the wounded ones would have
walked away. I pass on to you
on a platter of petitions the secrets
I find too weighty for my satchel;
I pass on to you on the wings
of prophesy, the stones the stranger
placed at my door; I pass on to you
in the sermon's fire the burdens
I will not carry; and this is how
I lighten my load, and how
I can walk through the looming

gloom ahead of me. I am
the detritus of love, I am
the ring of dead skin after
a bath, I am the sticky remains
of spilled piss, I am the stain
that stinks up the room, I am
the author of shame, I am
the wounded, I am the wounded,
and I close my eyes to push
away the darting lights,
speeding toward the center of me.

The 1.7 Percent Remnant

The others have left us here,
a thin margin of our survival,
the simplest way to reduce
the rates is to kill in thousands,
let them die, and they have
died, they have fought hard,
lingered on, pushing back,
and then given up—watch them,
backs to us, stepping into
the muck of trees, and now
we, the remnant, the stragglers
are left behind. This is the holiness
of the obsolete, the survivors
filled with the guilt of the chosen—
and they forget us, we are shadows
now, we are walking ghosts, we
are the offense—not pitiable
enough for horror, fear, and mercy;
so pilgrimage to the open
lots where the rotten
carcasses are circled by John
Crows, and dragged, to that place of
macka and weed and city detritus,
where they have left only rockstones

piled upon rockstones as the marker
of those who have gone—and we
who linger, we are the offense,
we have nothing to say,
we whisper in the back pews,
we are the last of it, it is
because of us that the perfection
of zeroes cannot be achieved,
and our woes are vanities they say.
and this is the light that embraces
the left behind, the remnant,
we are 1.8,
we are 1.7,
we are the last pin prick
under the skin, and for this
we feel the sorrow of orphans;
like the sons of that woman
a week ago, who for no
rhymed reason, slit her wrist
and hung herself until she
was dead—and we are like her
children, wondering what
we did in this life to earn such care.

Faith Healing

The unfortunate question in the glaring light,
now that you are breathing slowly,
now that your skin feels bright like after
orgasm; now that your body is emptied
of every tension, every anticipation, every
war to arrive at the riotous hallelujah,
now that there is a dull thumping
in your head—the eyes downcast
in the slight embarrassment after
abandon and dance; now that the crowd
becomes ordinary again, citizens
again; blank faces searching memory

for where the car is parked; now
that the musicians, pimple-faced,
journeyman-eyed, are gathering
their cord and tools; now that your
hands are occupied with sheets of paper,
and the blue carpet has lost its sheen,
the waves you saw, the surf undulating,
the shimmering of sunlight—now
that the rafters look bare, the glare
of fluorescents flattening everything—a temple
transformed into a gym—you can smell
the sugar—now in this interim, the too
young counselor asks, “Are you healed?
Was it something you can tell?” And you
know that she is not a prophetess—
“It is in my blood.” “Ah,” the eyes remain
blank, and the preacher and healer
was high stepping amens around your
fallen quivering self—you dreamed
of arriving at the water’s edge and finding
only stones; and the voice said,
“Where is the water, why did you take all
the water?” And you cried at this, which
the preacher said was forgiveness
unleashed—and then the blows of his
voice, “Out! Out!” before music
gathered and he was gone, the lingering
scent of lemons and sugar in his wake.
“It’s in my blood...” You say, and she
pleads with damp eyes. “Don’t tell
me, don’t tell me, don’t tell me.”
And you don’t, you don’t say the words
dancing wildly in your skull, you
don’t say it out of mercy, out
of a strange, tasteless kind of grace.

The Body

After "Skylark" by Brian Rutenberg

The monster walks toward the mud
of the vanishing light—the voices
will whisper approbation through
the night, and curled up on himself,
the monster will ask his penis
questions that have no answers—
you are, he says, the gun that turned
into a straw. You are the betrayer
of all my silences. You are a storm
of delight. You are to be bled, bled
until you shrink, until you are
a dry fist of mummified flesh—if you
take a whip and turn a body
into pulp, and if the body
does not have the strength
to stop the whip, then no one
will call that body strong,
no one will see that body shine—
if you take a hand, and force
it inside that body, twist
a flame of pain deep inside
that body, and apart from
the dull whimper of protest, the
body does not know how to
fight back, no one will call
that body fierce, no one will
call that body grace.
Deep in the mud, curled up with
the percolation of bitterness,
steeped in the marinate of
shame, the body grows a callous
thick as a hundred years of
lament. At dawn see it coming
toward you in the half light—this is
the barnacled weapon of our defiance,
this is the monstrous body of wars
and wars, broken for you, broken
for you—take, eat.

The Burning

For Franklin Jackson

They gather at the edges of flame,
they made the flame, they muttered,
they ordered the rituals of purging.
It is not blood they seek to cleanse
away, not the scent of death,
it's the shadow that arrives as a
curse, the lectric current that draws
goosebumps on the flesh on the
edges of the buried ground,
they gather to remove the stain
of dying from the garrison, for
vigilance is all. And the plates
are broken, the enamel cups
blackened, the pots burnt in, the
clothes, the skirts, the blouses,
the tattered garments, that leap up
in a dance of consuming, bright
with flame for an instant,
turning light as feathers and
then rising into a scattering of
lifting ash; and the people
gathered shift away from the
wind, they must breathe
the cremation of death,
and the flimsy walls collapse,
and the wooden chair glows
white with contained heat,
and at last the bed of offense,
where she shed all the fluids
of her wounds, where she
left the flesh falling off her
bones, there, unguarded,
naked, in the middle of
the inferno, the bed glows

as all demons must before
they fall wheezing into a heap
of ash; and only then, only
when all is reduced to the
black void of their evil
do they walk away, satisfied
that death has been beaten,
efficiently, dutifully, calmly.

Baptism of Dust

We did all we should have done,
bathed her, held her, sack of bones
gently to slip on the too generous
fabric of her before life, and we
painted flesh and hints of life
into her face so that those who
looked would not collapse from
sorrow, not so much for their loss
but for the pity of it, for the
cleansing terror of imagined suffering—
and as she had wanted, we
put him to the flames as they
had done to the house in the ghetto
shelter when she was taken to die
in the hospital. Let it be burnt
away, he said to her, all this
wounding on my skin, and may
this dust be pure as the purification
that comes of heat. We, a party
of apostates, saints, and reluctant
warriors, climbed the crooked path
to the cliff that looked over
the Caribbean Sea, our heads
pointing to South America
and the fantasy of flight, this
place, this light and the murmur
of the sea, this, too, he asked

us to promise to do. And the
gulls moved by with wise
nonchalance, as if death, too,
is ordinary as water. We stood
waiting to heal our stain,
we who felt contaminated
by death, this death, this
blood- and water-wasting death;
and who could have known how
the wind would turn or how far
their son would have to throw
the ashes? But the wind did
turn, and the ashes, tossed out,
were arrested in midair—then like
a spray of news off the sea,
they returned to us,
and we were baptized in ash,
our tongues dried with the taste
of him, our noses stuffed up,
our eyes stinging with his ashen
self, and what could we do,
facing the farce of it all,
but tremble at our uncharitable
fear, trying to clear our throats
discretely, our hearts thumping
from something like sorrow, like shame?

Sound

The ministry has lost all poetry—
the prosody of miracles lies in the
chemistry of the unimaginative mind.
Atrophy—Oh God, it is the atrophy.
“He needs to write me poems—”
“You used to guard my shame; you did.”
The minister has lost the gumption
to become all things to all men, that
great possession of the spirit, walking

into a house with the mouth
gaping, beckoning him to enter,
sweeping away the dust and waiting,
and in waiting, finding the battle,
taking to the faith. The minister
can no longer imagine his body
broken by disease for he has
forgotten his body broken by sin,
or wounds, or weakness, or fear—
it is the cost of false holiness
that cures us of the magic
of empathy and the language of mercy.
But who are these hauntings,
and who are they who come
with their withered and wild looks,
saying they do not know how
they came to be so? Somehow
the wind blows off the hills,
the scent of wood fires and burning
refuse, the scent of a city's
bodies panting in the heat,
and the pixelated cityscape
is the place to wait for sunset.
Can you imagine hearing
positive, positive, positive,
oh minister of miracle and song?

Elegy for the Candle Maker

For Glendon

For those hours of another interim,
you dreamed of lighting all the dark
corners of the city where the poor
settled in shadows, thankful for
the occasional illumination of a car's
headlights casually swooping
over the walls before the second

and third darkness, with candles
scented with lavender; you dreamed
of giving respite in the gloom to those
waiting for the sun—that unflinching
ball of white flattening everything.
This is what your hands could do,
you said; you with eyes wearily
seeking focus before the short
sharp glare of a smile. You show
your hands—the hands of a man
returned again from the dead,
this is what miracle hands can do,
what resurrection hands can do,
what Lazarus hands can do.
You take the soft coil of white thread,
the wick, the fuel, the persistence
of life, and lay it down on the wax-
embossed board. Then the raw
square of beeswax, with its soapy
scent; malleable as clay when warmed—
those you stack neatly so that the light
through the broken window
spreads inside the wax, as if lit
from within. On the sill, you have
lined the vials of dye and the silver
saucers of every aroma you have
imagined for days, your crushed
leaves and grasses, rubbing
your fingers and sniffing, frowning.
This, you say, is what a man's hands
can do in the in-between, the place
of restoration, of replenishment,
the place between the emptying
of death and the reimagining of futures.
You know that the body can return
to walk the streets, marry into love,
dream of making babies, laugh, and build
dreams of filling the world with light.
May they, Glendon, over your grave
with a thousand candles, and may they

light them after the Sankey and the tears,
and may they leave them there to illuminate
this last darkness we all must enter,
and may this torch turn the broken
sepulchers and crypts into a sudden
temple of grace, here in the interim
between memory of forgetting.

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