

● Late 1773: A publishing house in London releases “Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral,” by Phillis Wheatley, a 20-year-old enslaved woman in Boston, making her the first African-American to publish a book of poetry.

Pretend I wrote this at your grave.
Pretend the grave is marked. Pretend we know where it is.
Copp’s Hill, say. I have been there and you might be.
Foremother, your name is the boat that brought you.
Pretend I see it in the stone, with a gruesome cherub.
Children come with thin paper and charcoal to touch you.
Pretend it drizzles and a man in an ugly plastic poncho
circles the Mathers, all but sniffing the air warily.
We don’t need to pretend for this part.
There is a plaque in the grass for Increase, and Cotton.
And Samuel, dead at 78, final son, who was there
on the day when they came looking for proof.
Eighteen of them watched you and they signed to say:
*the Poems specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe)
written by Phillis, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since,
brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa*
and the abolitionists cheered at the blow to Kant
the Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling
and the enlightened ones bellowed at the strike against Hume
no ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no sciences

Pretend I was there with you, Phillis, when you asked in a letter to no one:
How many iambs to be a real human girl?
Which turn of phrase evidences a righteous heart?
If I know of Ovid may I keep my children?

Pretend that on your grave there is a date
and it is so long before my heroes came along to call you a coon
for the praises you sang of your captors
who took you on discount because they assumed you would die
that it never ever hurt your feelings.
Or pretend you did not love America.
Phillis, I would like to think that after you were released unto the world,
when they jailed your husband for his debts
and you lay in the maid’s quarters at night,
a free and poor woman with your last living boy,
that you thought of the Metamorphoses,
making the sign of Arachne in the tangle of your fingers.
And here, after all, lay the proof:
The man in the plastic runs a thumb over stone. The gray is slick and tough.
Phillis Wheatley: thirty-one. Had misery enough.

By Eve L. Ewing