

PoetrySlabs @ FEAST

6 May 2018

GO, GIRLS!

CONTEMPORARY POETRY BY AFRICAN-AMERICAN
WOMEN: ROBIN COSTE LEWIS, SAFIYA SINCLAIR, MORGAN PARKER,
NICOLE SEALEY, HARRYETTE MULLEN, PATRICIA SMITH & EVE L EWING

INTRODUCTION

This afternoon we'll be reading from the work of seven African-American women, most of whom are in their twenties, thirties, or forties and have come to particular prominence mainly in the past fifteen years or so. These are the 'new girls' on the block, writing in the Age of MeToo and Black Lives Matter, successors to titans of late-twentieth-century black poetry like Maya Angelou, Audré Lord, Nikki Giovanni, and Gwendolyn Brooks. (We'll be looking at the work of the latter four poets during Black History Month, this coming October.)

Safiya Sinclair's first collection, *Cannibal*, went off like a bomb in 2016, stunning critics and readers alike with what reviewer Michele Levy, of North Carolina A&T University, called an unflinching and completely uncompromising exposé of the 'pride, hypocrisy, and fear that underlie colonial systems of control, especially racism and patriarchy'. **Robin Coste Lewis's** first collection, *Voyage of the Sable Venus*, published in 2015, won a National Book Award (this was the first time a debut poetry collection had won the award since 1974) and was hailed by various critics as 'stunning', 'a masterpiece', 'formally polished, emotionally raw and wholly exquisite'. (Lewis has degrees in Sanskrit, Comparative Religious Literature, and Creative Writing – and she was also a recipient of a 2018 Women of the Year Award.) **Morgan Parker**, who has degrees in Anthropology and Creative Writing (from Columbia University and New York University), is the youngest of the poets we'll be encountering today. She is, one could say, 'coming up fast on the outside' and brings, I think, more in-your-face 'attitude' to her poetry than any of her peers. The title of her well-received first collection, *Other People's Comfort Keeps Me Up at Night*, pretty much says it all, and her second collection, *There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé*, from which we'll be reading, rams gallons of energy and angst into very small pots (few of her poems run to more than thirty very short lines). **Harryette Mullen**, a professor of English at UCLA, grew up, she informs us, speaking Standard English – which rather queered the pitch of her life as a woman of colour and finds itself directly reflected in the title of her best-known collection, *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, from which we'll be reading. She's wonderfully adept at

turning language inside out, and she's also what I like to think of as the Tina Turner (or maybe Nina Simone) of free association. **Nicole Sealey**, born in the US Virgin Islands and raised in Florida, was a finalist for the 2018 PEN Open Book Award (for her first collection, *Ordinary Beast*) and won the 2015 Drinking Gourd Chapbook Poetry Prize for *The Animal After Whom Other Animals Are Named* (a tiny book that weighs a conceptual ton). Of *Ordinary Beast*, the American poet Claudia Rankine has written: 'Though these poems are attuned to their own devastation, they continue unapologetically with their own aspirations.' Which is another way of saying that Nicole Sealey never, but never, gives up. **Patricia Smith**, a graduate of Southern Illinois University and Northwestern University, is now in her sixties and has won more awards than any of her competitors. *Blood Dazzler*, from which we'll be reading today, was a 2008 National Book Award finalist and somehow manages to embrace the entirety of the disaster (civic, physical, political, racial) that was Hurricane Katrina. **Eve L Ewing**, one of the youngest poets whose work we'll be reading today, is a sociologist of education at the University of Chicago and has a particular interest in the subject of school (meaning 'black school') closures. Critic Elizabeth King has described Ewing's first collection, *Electric Arches*, as 'at once a portrait of [Ewing's Chicago] home, a tender letter to black youth, and a call to her audience to think beyond the confines of systemic racism.' Ewing's next book, *Ghosts in the Schoolyard: Racism and School Closings on Chicago's South Side*, will be published later this year by the University of Chicago Press.

My Vinyl Weighs a Ton

By Morgan Parker

Sit down shut up slip me out of my sleeve.
I have come from the grasses of California.

Twenty years of the dark I carry.
The sun bends its back over Struggle City.

It hits me first thing: I've never been cool.
I am driving with glass eyes and lead feet.

I jetpack into the heaviness alone.
My bare face hanging out all over the kitchen counter.

What's largest is the ego, half animal growing near mint.
I'm a rare EP strutting into the brown morning.

T-shirts are a theme. The neighborhood watches.
Lawn chairs tumble into the liquor stores alone.

The good old urban sprawl at half volume.
It is literally just another day.

Denigration

By Harryette Mullen

Did we surprise our teachers who had niggling doubts about the picayune brains of small black children who reminded them of clean pickaninnies on a box of laundry soap? How muddy is the Mississippi compared to the third-longest river of the darkest continent? In the land of the Ibo, the Hausa, and the Yoruba, what is the price per barrel of nigrescence? Though slaves, who were wealth, survived on niggardly provisions, should inheritors of wealth fault the poor enigma for lacking a dictionary? Does the mayor demand a recount of every bullet or does city hall simply neglect the black alderman's district? If I disagree with your beliefs, do you chalk it up to my negligible powers of discrimination, supposing I'm just trifling and not worth considering? Does my niggling concern with trivial matters negate my ability to negotiate in good faith? Though Maroons, who were unruly Africans, not loose horses or lazy sailors, were called renegades in Spanish, will I turn any blacker if I renege on this deal?

Ethel's Sestina

By Patricia Smith

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans in 2005, Ethel Freeman's body sat for days in her wheelchair outside the New Orleans Convention Center. Her son Herbert, who had assured his mother that help was on the way, was forced to leave her there once she died. This single incident became emblematic of the failings of the Federal Emergency Management Agency and its director, Michael Brown, a political appointee (friend of George W Bush) with no prior experience of disaster management.

Gon' be obedient in this here chair,
gon' bide my time, fanning against this sun.
I ask my boy, and all he says is *Wait*.
He wipes my brow with steam, says I should sleep.
I trust his every word. Herbert my son.
I believe him when he says help gon' come.

Been so long since all these suffrin' folks come
to this place. Now on the ground 'round my chair,
they sweat in my shade, keep asking my son
could that be a bus they see. It's the sun
foolin' them, shining much too loud for sleep,
making us hear engines, wheels. Not yet. Wait.

Lawd, some folks prayin' for rain while they wait,
forgetting what rain can do. When it come,
it smashes living flat, wakes you from sleep,
eats streets, washes you clean out of the chair
you be sittin' in. Best to praise this sun,
shinin' its dry shine. *Lawd have mercy, son,*

is it coming? Such a strong man, my son.
Can't help but believe when he tells us, *Wait*.
Wait some more. Wish some trees would block this sun.
We wait. Ain't no white men or buses come,
but look – see that there? Get me out this chair,
help me stand on up. No time for sleepin',

cause look what's rumbling this way. If you sleep,
you gon' miss it. *Look there*, I tell my son.
He don't hear. I'm 'bout to get out this chair,
but the ghost in my legs tells me to wait,
wait for the salvation that's sho to come.
I see my savior's face 'longside that sun.

Nobody sees me runnin' toward the sun.
Lawd, they think I done gone and fell asleep.
They don't hear *Come*.

Come.

Come.

Come.

Come.

Come.

Come.

Ain't but one power make me leave my son.
I can't wait, Herbert. Lawd knows I can't wait.
Don't cry, boy. I ain't in that chair no more.

Wish you coulda come on this journey, son,
seen that old sweet sun lift me out of sleep.
Didn't have to wait. And see my golden chair?

Hysterical Strength

By Nicole Sealey

When I hear news of a hitchhiker
struck by lightning yet living,
or a child lifting a two-ton sedan
to free his father pinned underneath,
or a camper fighting off a grizzly
with her bare hands until someone,
a hunter perhaps, can shoot it dead,
my thoughts turn to black people –
the hysterical strength we must
possess to survive our very existence,
which I fear many believe is, and
treat as, itself a freak occurrence.

Family Portrait

By Safiya Sinclair

At our table we don't say grace.
We sit silent in the face of our questions,
a crown of mosquitos swarming our heads.

In this picture, some hot day in March,
the sun makes a strange halo around my ear,
light exploding in our dining room window.

Outside, the mongrels whine against our door,
two pups forbidden shelter for their impurity,
my weak heart dividing to offer all its scraps.

But what could I offer them, when I knew nothing
of love, and took my corrections with the belt
every evening? There in that city of exile, cobbled

square of salt-rust and rebellion, my father's face looms
its last obstruction, where the dark folds of bougainvillea
remain unclimbing; the one clipped flower

of my objection. That withering bloom still hangs limply
in its tangled brooch; my dress, my hands, bruised and falling
loosely about my thighs, unable to ask for a single thing.

And perhaps it was only the rain howling in my ear,
as I observe my doppelgänger in the shadows of the frame,
setting fire to the curtains while we slept. Poisoning

whatever dark potion fills my father's cup, my mother
at his shoulder with her fixed pitcher, pouring. She was
pregnant then, and still wore the mouth of her youth,

so quiet and unsure of itself, her fingers' twelve points
streaked across the jug's fogged glass. There I am again.
I am not myself – long before I shed my Medusa hair,

before anyone caught my sister eating black bits
of a millipede, shell and yellow fur snagged in her teeth,
I had my crooked guilt. My brother with his dagger

at my throat. This is us. This is all of us.
Before we knew this life would shatter, moving wild
and unwanted through the dark and the light.

Art & Craft

By Robin Coste Lewis

I would figure out all the right answers
first, then gently mark a few of them wrong.
If a quiz had ten problems, I'd cancel
out one. When it had twenty, I'd bite my tongue

then leave at least two questions blank: _____ .
A B was good, but an A was too good.
They'd kick your ass, call your big sister
slow, then stare over your desk, as if you'd

snaked out of a different hole. Knowing
taught me — quickly — to spell *community*
more honestly: *l-o-n-e-l-y*.
During Arts and Crafts, when Miss Larson allowed

the scissors out, I'd sneak a pair, then cut
my hair to stop me from growing too long.

Origin Story

By Eve L Ewing

This is true:
my mother and my father
met at the Greyhound bus station
in the mid-eighties in Chicago.
my mother, all thick glass and afro puff,
came west on the train when she was nineteen,
lived in a friend's house and cared for her children,
played tambourine in a Chaka Khan cover band.
my father, all sleeveless and soft eye,
ran away from home when he was seventeen,
mimeographed communist newspapers
and drew comic books
like this one, for sale. one dollar.
my mother bought one.

love is like a comic book. it's fragile
and the best we can do is protect it
in whatever clumsy ways we can:
plastic and cardboard, dark rooms
and boxes. in this way, something
never meant to last
might find its way to another decade,
another home, an attic, a basement, intact.
love is paper.
and if my parents' love was a comic book,
it never saw polyvinyl, never felt a backing.
it was curled into a back pocket for a day at the park,
lent to a friend, read under covers,
reread hanging upside-down over the back of the couch,
memorized, mishandled, worn thin, staples rusted.
a love like that doesn't last
but it has a good ending.

Delicate and Jumpy

By Morgan Parker

Turns out I feel my body
more than I should. My eyes dart

like a small animal. I'm a museum
of necklines and cloudscapes, a heaven

diving into the wrong hard mountain.
Soon a beer-colored sky will sneak

up behind the fence. I toss my hair
to the street without permission.

A couple in matching pea coats smokes
electronic cigarettes across the platform

I am a tiny robot like them
but there is no one to love my robo-heart.

On the last day of the year I enter
a scalding tub and think you away.

It is too cold and too quiet for me
to sign language the sky.

Right now six people are in outer space,
and you are growing smaller in my mind.

I just want to have a heart for this, to be
a shaved dog, begging at your heels.

Extracts from: 'She Swam on from Sea to Shine'

By Harryette Mullen

Those saxophone streets and scratchy sidewalks. Those Baptist conventions. That steamy summer. The boy who threw tar on me. The boy who made me his tar baby. The one who broke my watch, knocked me down, pushed me over. The boy who threw rocks at me. The boy who lost his foot under the wheels of a train. The boy who bought me ice cream. The girl who was my friend. The girl who wanted to give me a kitten. The girl with burnt hands. The girl whose house was dark. The girl who never wore socks. The girl who said, "Poot on you." I had a ribbon in my hair. I was too proper and prissy. I must think I'm something. I must think she's nothing.

The nuns were smart teachers, but she didn't care for them. They didn't care for her and called her friend a guttersnipe. The nuns in their brick *pan dulce* magnolia convent, their virgin rose *tortilla de maíz* garden grotto, their *Carnicería Chapultepec* chapel. These nuns don't talk Spanish, you could say French. Parlor fluent frenchy, jumble lying crawfish pie filling gumball¹. They taught girls to knit. They taught her to hit the piano. They taught all the girls to say *hell merry fuller greys, dolores wit you, blast duh art mung wimmen, blast dis fruit uh duh loom, cheez wiz*.² Anomie, dull party, dull filly, dull spitter shoo sanity. I am my mother's daughter who put me in the water to see if I could swim. My hair went back to Africa. I baptize thee. Hiccup, hiccup, hiccup.

Didn't Need No Music Neither

By Patricia Smith

Again, for Mama Freeman

You told me they was gon' come, Herbert,
and they did, dressed in the kind of white that blinds,
and they whole body was hands, moving grace
over dust, pulling circle straight. Every bone
all of a sudden like that music a blind man makes
when he leaning on just one organ key.
You tole me *Wait, mama, they almost here*.
And they came quiet,

¹ A parody of a repeating line in the Hank Williams Sr song 'Jambalaya', with which the Carpenters had a huge hit in 1970s: *Jambalaya, crawfish pie, and filé gumbo*. (*Filé gumbo is a spice derived from sassafras root*.)

² A very African-American schoolgirl parody of the Catholic 'Hail Mary': *Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus*.

roundabout and back door like breeze,
then they said

Ethel

Mayo

Freeman

just as clear and plain.
You didn't see them, boy, you ain't seen me walk away
with one of them on each arm like a li'l ol' sassy gal?
Don't tell me you missed mama on her ol' legs
dancing with them pretty mens in the mud

Another White Christmas in Virginia

By Safiya Sinclair

The house at the end of my street
has been looming all winter.

Perched garishly through this sour
season, pepper-lights slinking red,

gold in its wake, heralding the sign
of its own coronation, its million

chittering fires, Chevy-pickup colony
declaring the sidewalk. This their own

white sky, old names they refuse to bury.
The whole yard a boisterous spectacle.

I long to set fire to all of it. The glimmering
reindeer, fat snowman inflating his visible

lung, ghost child ringing his one hoarse
bell through the night. That bright harassment

of Santas. The idea of America burning
holes in the lawn. Who could live here?

With enough mirth to power my city,
enough of myself haunting me in some

other place. Nonetheless. One matchstick
man comes and goes on their horizon,

walking hard on his invisible horse,
Confederate buckle-stroke kicking,

toothpick silences. No words ever pass
between us as he hoists and pulleys

his large flag, daily hanging and freezing
through the verbless rubble of these

months, determined as an eagle. Clawing
at its steady rituals. *Don't tread on me.*

Still I am resolved to come friendly, built
and nested my cowboy greeting, torched it out

into this world and watched it choke
soundless, die with good foot caught

in their blue hydrangeas. The hawk-wife watching.
Spies me smiling, waving in their driveway

of angels, swoops up her children
and says nothing, but retreats from

some darkening on the horizon,
some fast approaching plague.

it's not fitness, it's a lifestyle

By Nicole Sealey

I'm waiting for a white woman
in this overpriced Equinox
to mistake me for someone other
than a paying member. I can see it now –
as I leave the steam room
(naked but for my wedding ring?)
she'll ask whether I've finished
cleaning it. Every time
I'm at an airport I see a bird
flying around inside, so fast I can't
make out its wings. I ask myself
what is it doing here? I've come
to answer: what is any of us?

Catalog I: Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome

By Robin Coste Lewis

This piece is taken from a narrative poem entitled 'Voyage of the Sable Venus', comprised, as the author informs us in the prologue, 'solely and entirely of the titles, catalog entries, or exhibit descriptions of Western art objects in which a black female figure is present, dating from 38,000 BCE to the present'. The first of the formal rules she set for herself is as follows: 'No title could be broken or changed in any way. While the grammar is completely modified – I erased all periods, commas, semicolons – each title was left as published, and was not syntactically annotated, edited, or fragmented.'

I.

Statuette of a Woman Reduced
to the Shape of a Flat Paddle

Statuette of a Black Slave Girl
Right Half of Body and Head Missing

Head of a Young Black Woman Fragment
from a Statuette of Black Dancing Girl

Reserve Head of an African Princess
Statuette of a Concubine

Full Length Figure of a Standing
Black Woman Wearing Earrings

Statuette Once Supported an Unguent Vase
Vase with Neck in the Form of a Head

of a Black Statuette of a Female
Figure with Negroid Features

Figure's Left Arm Missing Head
of a Female Full-Length Figure

of a Nubian Woman
the Arms Missing

Bust of Draped Female Facing Forward
One Breast Exposed Black

Adolescent Female with Long Curls and Bare
Breasts Wearing a Voluminous Crown

Partially Broken Young Black Girl
Presenting a Stemmed Bowl

Supported
by a Monkey

Columbus Hospital

By Eve L Ewing

The first stone is the hardest
which is why they don't use hands anymore.
Too much, the push of the granite on the pads of the fingers
too much like the push of a match on the side of the dollar-store box
when the phosphorous has all gone out of it, the tinder has all gone
out of its heart, and the red is scratched with brown such that you
rub and scrape but the fire never comes.
It hurts too much, that fruitless scrape.

So they don't use their hands anymore.
No, the croaking chain does a man's job.
Wrecking balls don't get arthritis or cry
or show up on site with lunches their wives made,
bleary-eyed, standing in worn housecoats in the darkness.
The dynamite never says "but my uncle died
here, in this hospital, and I still smell the ammonia
and see the misshapen pound cake"
while the tremor spreads
and the walls come down.