

# RACISM/KUDZU KUDZU/RACISM



Tommie Smith and Juan Carlos, Gold and Bronx Medalists Olympics Mexico 1968  
with Peter Norman Australian Silver Medalist

*"We heard the rain falling and that was the blood falling; and when we came to get in the crops, it was dead men that we reaped." Harriet Tubman*

\* For tho' I fly to 'scape from Fortune's rage,  
And bear the scars of envy, spite, and scorn,  
Yet with mankind no horrid war I wage,  
Yet with no impious spleen my breast is torn:  
For virtue lost, and ruin'd man, I mourn.

The Dying Negro A Poem John Bicknell 1793 (revised by Thomas Day)

**An Epistle, &c. The Dying Poet**

**ARM'D** with thy sad last gift—the pow'r to die,

Thy shafts, stern fortune, now I can defy;  
Thy dreadful mercy points at length the shore,  
Where all is peace, and men are slaves no more;  
—This weapon, ev'n in chains, the brave can wield,  
And vanquish'd, quit triumphantly the field:  
—Beneath such wrongs let pallid Christians live,  
Such they can perpetrate, and may forgive.  
Yet while I tread that gulph's tremendous brink,  
Where nature shudders, and where beings sink,

Whom fate forbade thy tenderness to save.  
Receive these sighs—to thee my soul I breathe—  
Fond love in dying groans is all I can bequeathe.

Fall'n are my trophies, blasted is my fame,  
Myself become a thing without a name,  
The sport of haughty lords, and ev'n of slaves the shame. }

Ne'er had my youth such winning softness seen,  
Where Afric's sable beauties dance the green,

Why does my ling'ring soul her flight delay? Come, lovely maid, and gild the dreary way! Come,  
wildly rushing with disorder'd charms, And clasp thy bleeding lover in thy arms; Close his sad eyes,  
receive his parting breath, And sooth him sinking to the shades of death!

Fly swift ye years!—Arise thou glorious morn!  
Thou great avenger of thy race be born!  
The conqu'ror's palm and deathless fame be thine!  
One gen'rous stroke, and liberty be mine!  
—And now, ye pow'rs! to whom the brave are dear,  
Receive me falling, and your suppliant hear.  
To you this unpolluted blood I pour,  
To you that spirit which you gave restore!  
I ask no lazy pleasures to possess,  
No long eternity of happiness;—  
But if unstain'd by voluntary guilt,  
At your great call this being I have spilt,  
For all the wrongs which innocent I share,  
For all I've suffer'd, and for all I dare;  
O lead me to that spot, that sacred shore,  
Where souls are free, and men oppress no more!

**THE END**



### *Kudzu by James Dickey*

Japan invades. Far Eastern vines  
Run from the clay banks they are  
Supposed to keep from eroding.  
Up telephone poles,  
Which rear, half out of leafage  
As though they would shriek,  
Like things smothered by their own  
Green, mindless, unkillable ghosts.  
In Georgia, the legend says  
That you must close your windows  
At night to keep it out of the house.  
The glass is tinged with green, even so,  
As the tendrils crawl over the fields.  
The night the kudzu has  
Your pasture, you sleep like the dead.  
Silence has grown Oriental  
And you cannot step upon ground:  
Your leg plunges somewhere  
It should not, it never should be,  
Disappears, and waits to be struck  
Anywhere between sole and kneecap:  
For when the kudzu comes,  
The snakes do, and weave themselves  
Among its lengthening vines,  
Their spade heads resting on leaves,  
Growing also, in earthly power  
And the huge circumstance of concealment.

One by one the cows stumble in,  
Drooling a hot green froth,  
And die, seeing the wood of their stalls  
Strain to break into leaf.  
In your closed house, with the vine  
Tapping your window like lightning,  
You remember what tactics to use.  
In the wrong yellow fog-light of dawn  
You herd them in, the hogs,  
Head down in their hairy fat,  
The meaty troops, to the pasture.  
The leaves of the kudzu quake  
With the serpents' fear, inside  
The meadow ringed with men  
Holding sticks, on the country roads.  
The hogs disappear in the leaves.  
The sound is intense, subhuman,  
Nearly human with purposive rage.  
There is no terror  
Sound from the snakes.  
No one can see the desperate, futile  
Striking under the leaf heads.  
Now and then, the flash of a long  
Living vine, a cold belly,  
Leaps up, torn apart, then falls  
Under the tussling surface.  
You have won, and wait for frost,  
When, at the merest touch  
Of cold, the kudzu turns  
Black, withers inward and dies,  
Leaving a mass of brown strings  
Like the wires of a gigantic switchboard.  
You open your windows,  
With the lightning restored to the sky  
And no leaves rising to bury  
You alive inside your frail house,  
And you think, in the opened cold,  
Of the surface of things and its terrors,  
And of the mistaken, mortal  
Arrogance of the snakes  
As the vines, growing insanely, sent  
Great powers into their bodies  
And the freedom to strike without warning:  
From them, though they killed  
Your cattle, such energy also flowed  
To you from the knee-high meadow  
(It was as though you had  
A green sword twined among  
The veins of your growing right arm--  
Such strength as you would not believe  
If you stood alone in a proper  
Shaved field among your safe cows--):  
Came in through your closed  
Leafy windows and almighty sleep  
And prospered, till rooted out.

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The following statement appeared in an agricultural bulletin in 1928, about 20 years after it was first introduced in Florida as a forage crop. "Kudzu is not without disadvantages. It is slow and expensive in getting established, is exacting in requiring only moderate grazing and mowing, is deceptive about its real yield, especially to those who do not know it well, and sometimes becomes a pest."



Kudzu covered abandoned barns, garages and chicken houses are much more numerous around the south than the houses shown above. When there is little incentive to keep the kudzu at bay it only takes two or three years of kudzu growth to at least partially cover the structures.

Image below was made in 2005 across the highway from a shopping center in Dahlonega, Georgia.

**BETH ANN FENNELLY**  
***The Kudzu Chronicles***

—Oxford, Mississippi

1.

*Kudzu sallies into the gully  
like a man pulling up a chair to a table  
where a woman was happily dining alone.  
Kudzu sees a field of cotton,  
wants to be its better half.  
Pities the red clay, leaps across  
the color wheel to tourniquet.  
Sees every glass half full,  
pours itself in. Then over the brim.  
Scribbles in every margin  
with its green highlighter. Is begging  
to be measured. Is pleased*

*to make acquaintance with  
your garden, which it is pleased to name  
Place Where I Am Not.  
Yet. Breeds its own welcome mat.*

2.

*Why fret  
if all it wants  
is to lay one heart-  
shaped palm  
on your sleeping back?  
Why fright  
when the ice  
machine dumps its  
armload of diamonds?*

3.

*The Japanese who brought the kudzu here in 1876  
didn't bring its natural enemies,  
those hungry beasties sharpening their knives,  
and that's why kudzu grows best  
so far from the land of its birth.  
As do I, belated cutting, here without my blights,  
without my pests, without the houses or the histories  
or the headstones of my kin, here, a blank slate  
in this adopted cemetery, which feels  
a bit like progress, a bit like cowardice.  
Kudzu quickly aped the vernacular—most folks assume  
it's native. Thus, it's my blend-in mentor, big brother  
waltzing in a chlorophyll suit, amethyst cufflinks.  
When I first moved down South, I spent a year  
one afternoon with a sad sack doyenne in Mobile  
and her photos of Paris, interesting only because of her hats—  
ostrich feathers, ermine trim, and pearl hat pins—  
Oh, no, I don't wear them now, they're in the attic,  
full of moths, wish I could get rid of them,  
she said when I asked—and I, green enough,  
Yankee enough, to believe this, said I'd like them—  
and wherever I went after that, the Spanish moss  
wagged its beards at me repeating her judgement—  
pushy—that took a year to stop smarting—Hey lady,  
where I'm from? They called me exuberant.*

4.

*I asked a neighbor,      early on,  
if there was a way  
to get rid of it—  
Well, he said,*

over the kudzu fence,  
I suppose  
if you sprayed it  
with whiskey  
maybe  
the Baptists would eat it—  
then, chuckling,  
he turned  
and walked back inside his house.

5.  
September 9 and still so ripe  
the bread molds overnight,  
the mushrooms pop up like periscopes,  
tree's limbs wear hair nets—  
really the frothy nests of worms—  
the men have athlete's foot,  
the women yeast infections,  
and even on Country Club Drive  
they can't keep the mold  
off their cathedral ceilings

6.  
Isn't it rather a privilege to live so close to the cemetery that the dead can send us greetings,  
that the storm can blow bouquets from the graves to my front yard? Yes, the long spring here  
is beautiful, dusk brings its platter of rain to the pot luck and the centipede grass is glad and  
claps its thousand thousand legs, oh once last May I flung open my door to the rain-wrung,  
spit-shined world, and there it was on my welcome mat, red plastic carnations spelling: MOM.

7.  
Odor of sweat, sweet rot, and road kill.  
I run past this slope of kudzu  
all through the bitchslap of August,  
run past the defrocked  
and wheelless police car  
(kudzu driving,  
kudzu shotgun,  
kudzu cuffed in back),  
run past these buzzards so often  
they no longer look up,  
tucking black silk napkins  
beneath their bald black necks.  
Sweat, rot, and road kill—and yet  
the purple scent of kudzu blossoms.  
After a while, other perfumes smell too simple, or  
too sweet.  
After a while, running these country roads—  
one small woman in white,  
headphones trapping  
the steel wail of the pedal guitar—

one forgets the kudzu's  
avalanche, and that's  
when it makes its snatch—  
turn your head to catch—  
then it holds its hands  
behind its back, whistling.  
Juan Carlos Garcia RIP  
is painted on the road.  
If you need to dump a body,  
do it here.

8.

Nothing can go wrong on a day like this,  
at the county fair with my friends and their kids,  
and we're all kids wherever there's a 500 pound pumpkin,  
a squash resembling Jay Leno,  
fried Twinkies and Oreos,  
kudzu tea, kudzu blossom jelly, kudzu vine wreathes,  
4-H Club heifers and a newborn goat which peed like a toad when I lifted it,  
we're all kids drinking lemonade  
spiked with vodka, strolling between the rickety wooden cabins  
waving our fans, "Jez Burns for Coroner" stapled on a tongue depressor,  
then milling around the bandstand  
where every third kid in the talent show sings "God Bless America,"  
where the governor kisses babies,  
where later "The High School Reunion Band"  
makes everyone boogie from shared nostalgia and bourbon  
and where  
why not  
I'm dancing in front of the speakers  
and let the bassist pull me on stage, where  
why not  
I dance like I do for my bedroom mirror  
Behold I Am A Rock Star  
I cross my wrists over my shirt front, grab a fist of hem in each hand,  
gesture like I would shuck it off over my head  
just to watch my fans go wild  
I love Mississippi  
later I tell D and A about it and they say  
Neshoba County Fairgrounds  
wasn't that where the bodies of the civil rights activists were dumped?  
Like the kudzu I'd stroll away, whistling,  
hands behind my back,  
like on a day when nothing, nothing can go wrong

9.

When I look back on Illinois,  
I see our little house on the prairie, the bubble in the level. I see  
tyrannical horizon, each  
solitary human pinned against the sky less like a Spanish exclamation mark



than a lower case i.  
One had perspective enough to see the ways one's life was botched.  
When I look back, it is always  
winter, forehead cold against bedroom window, below me the neighbor's  
shredding trampoline  
offering its supplicant eyeful of snow month after month after month  
to the heedless white carapace of sky.  
It was either  
the winter of my father's slow drowning in liquids clear like water  
but fermented  
from the dumb skulls of vegetables—potatoes, hops, and corn—

Or it was the winter  
deep inside my body where my baby died by drowning  
in liquids clear like water  
cut with blood—for weeks I walked, a tomb, a walking tomb.  
In the heartland I remember,  
it was always winter, and if spring came at all it came like a crash of guests  
arriving so late  
we'd changed into pajamas, thrown the wilted party food away.  
The western wind we'd waited for  
hurled an oak limb, like a javelin, through the black eye of the trampoline.

It's not fair, my mother claims,  
to blame a state simply because each morning sorrow patronized my kitchen  
and stood behind my barstool,  
running her bone-cold fingers through my hair.  
But Mama, sorrow  
hasn't managed to track me here. Strict, honest Illinois: No more.  
Let me grow misty  
in mindless Mississippi, a name that children chant between numbers  
to measure out their seconds—  
ironic in this state that's rotten  
at keeping time, where, as Faulkner wrote, *The past is never dead;*  
*it's not even past.*

It's true,  
what Barry Hannah writes: *In Mississippi, it is difficult to achieve a vista.*  
You betcha.

10.  
*Is that why we fuck so much?*  
*Because we're so hot to the touch?*  
*It's too hot to think, too hot for the paper*  
*your fingers sweat through, we're deep*  
*in the dog days so why not take off*  
*early from work, why not take off*  
*the this and the that,*  
*what's a little more sweat from a bottle of Bass,*  
*what's a little more sweat from his hand on your ass,*  
*why not stop, drop, and roll, why not climb up on top,*

*what a view of the moon, what a nice little pop,  
arf arf—  
arf arf—  
arrooooooooooooooooooooo—*

11.

*Am I not a Southern writer now,  
Have I not walked to the giant plot the kudzu wants but is denied,  
Have I not paused to read the brass historical marker,  
Have I not marked the twenty paces eastward with solemn feet,  
enjoying my solemnity,  
Have I not trod lightly on those who lay sleeping,  
Have I not climbed the three steps to the Falkner plot, raised as a throne is raised,  
Have I not seen his stone, the “u” he added to sound British,  
affecting a limp when he returned from a war where he saw no action,  
“Count No Count,” making his butler answer the door  
to creditors he couldn’t pay, offering to send an autographed book  
to pay his bill at Neilson’s department store  
because it will be worth a damn sight more than my autograph on a check,  
Have I not also been ridiculous, have I not also played at riches,  
Have I not assumed the earth owed me more than it gave,  
especially now that he lies beneath it, under this sod blanket, this comforter,  
in the cedar-bemused cemetery of his own describing,  
Have I not stooped beside his gravestone and sunk my best pen into the red dirt,  
leaving it there to bloom with the others  
beside the pennies, the scraps of lyrics, the corncobs and bourbon bottles,  
because we often dress our supplications so they masquerade as gifts,  
Have I not suspected Faulkner would scoff at this, at all of this,  
but have I not felt encradled?*

12.

*Common names include  
Mile-a-minute-vine  
foot-a-night-vine  
cuss-you-vine  
drop-it-and-run-vine.  
Covering seven million acres,  
and counting.*

*Like the noble peanut,  
a legume, but unlike the noble peanut,  
forced into guerrilla warfare—  
1945, U.S. government stops subsidizing Kudzu Clubs  
1953, Government stops advocating the farming of kudzu  
1960, Research shifts from propagation to eradication  
1972, Congress declares a weed  
1980, Research proves certain herbicides actually cause kudzu to grow faster  
1997, Congress declares a noxious weed  
Oh you can hoe it out of your garden, of course,  
but, listen, isn’t that your phone?  
Take heed, blithe surgeon,*

*resting your hoe  
in the snake-headed leaves, and walking inside.  
The leaves disengage their jaw bones—  
cough once to choke the hoe halfway down,  
cough twice, and it was never there.*

13.

*When I die here,  
for I sense this, I'll die in Mississippi,  
state with the sing-songiest name  
I remember, at five, learning to spell—  
when I die here,  
my singular stone will stand alone  
among the Falkners and the Faulkners,  
the Isoms and the Neilsons, these headstones  
which fin down hills like schools of fish.  
I'll be a letter of a foreign font,  
what the typesetter used to call a bastard.  
And even when my husband and daughter  
are dragged down beside me,  
their shared name  
won't seem to claim my own,  
not to any horseman passing by.*

*Listen, kin and stranger,  
when I go to the field and lie down,  
let my stone be a native stone.  
Let the deer come at dusk  
from the woods behind the church  
and let them nibble acorns off my grave.  
Then let the kudzu blanket me,  
for I always loved the heat,  
let its hands rub out my name,  
for I always loved affection. ■*

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### ***KUDZU USES:***

#### ***Soil improvement and preservation***

*Kudzu has been used as a form of [erosion control](#) and also to enhance the [soil](#).*

#### ***Animal feed***

*Kudzu can be used by grazing animals, as it is high in quality as a [forage](#) and palatable to [livestock](#).*

#### ***Basketry***

Kudzu fiber has long been used for fiber art and basketry.

#### ***Medicine***

It may come as a surprise to southern gardeners that kudzu is good for many ailments and has powerful medicinal properties.

#### ***United States***

Kudzu was introduced from Japan into the United States at the Japanese pavilion in the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. It has been spreading at the rate of 150,000 acres annually



Kudzu Flower

# RACISM/KUDZU

## KUDZU/RACISM



*It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn't bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face."<sup>[2]</sup>*

The Souls of Black Folk W.E.B. Du Bois 1903

The Crying of Water

O Water, voice of my heart,  
Crying in the sand,  
All night long crying  
with mournful cry.  
As I lie and listen,  
and cannot understand  
The voice of my heart in my side,  
or the voice of the sea.  
O water, water,  
crying for rest,  
Is it I? is it I?  
All night long  
The water is crying to me.

The Crying of Water by Arthur Symons 1914

"What we ask of him is, that he should find out for us more than we can find out for ourselves.... He must have the passion of a lover."

Arthur Symons (1865-1945), British poet, critic (1906).

“The soul that is within me no man can degrade.”

~ Frederick Douglass quote

“Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe.”

~ Frederick Douglass quote



Frederick Douglass





No man can put a chain about the ankle of his fellow man without at last finding the other end fastened about his own neck.

**Frederick Douglass**

America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future.

**Frederick Douglass**

A little learning, indeed, may be a dangerous thing, but the want of learning is a calamity to any people.

**Frederick Douglass**

### **Vocabulary Builds But Not to Explain:**

**Catfish noodler** one who fishes bare-handed

**Noodling** is [fishing](#) for [catfish](#) using only bare hands, practiced primarily in the [southern United States](#). The noodler places his hand inside a discovered catfish hole.

**catfisting, grabbling, graveling, hogging, catdaddling, dogging, gurgling, tickling and stumping**

**chum** Bait usually consisting of oily fish ground up and scattered on the water.

To fish with such bait.

To lure (fish) with such bait.

## **Choking Chum Noodling Kudzu**

Choking chum noodling  
Kudzu chokes hard  
Life twisted out  
Chum lures  
Noodling to cuddle fish  
Kudzu to choke  
The life out of the south

The casket is open  
I am not yet there  
Emmett Till holds my place  
The ghost there of  
My death will go unnoted  
Kicked a few stones  
But nothing much  
In the scale of things  
Got killed inside  
By a mother's  
Stone cold murderous love  
Talked to myself about death dying  
Taking my own life  
Never did maybe will still  
Hours running out  
Time with it  
No longer able  
To bring my hand to mouth  
Stuffed with pills  
Hands too weak to draw blood  
Against my wrists  
Skin so thin  
Can see the plink plinking  
Of blood moving through

And yet and yet  
Emmett Till holds my place  
His face his life  
Always before my eyes  
Always in my heart  
I have wanted to do right  
I have wanted not to hate  
Angry bitter haters  
Some from so much privilege

Afraid of losing all  
Hating black skin and black president  
And black people

In the common square  
Never for a moment free  
Of pejorative blackness  
Your meaning I can never know  
But I can  
My family perished at the hand  
Of the Nazi's  
They hated us because  
We were Jewish  
Whatever that is

Keep the casket open  
My ashes to be spilled in  
Lying along side  
A son plunged into death  
By the fist of rage and hatred  
My ashes to keep it alive and warm  
Much like ash around a tree  
An emollient fertilizer mulch  
Like me unseen but my heart  
Left behind for  
What never could be explained  
Insanity grips at the end of hate  
Of fathoming  
Birth cries scream a little louder  
Fate still awakens  
Just as your head crowns

Never went insane  
Never probed hard enough  
Deep enough  
To lose my mind  
Tacit living beyond  
Steals the soul  
Madness not love yet  
To reconcile  
Our hatred still so  
Bloody rich and throbbing

## **Momma**

Momma hold me, Momma next to me  
On this hard wood bench  
Waiting next to me  
To be taken to work  
Waiting Momma for a hand to hold  
My name to be called and stroked and loved  
Oh Momma, I need you now  
To kiss me  
And make it all better somehow.

NB 1970's

## **Lost Children**

What Mother's lost children are these  
Cluttering up the streets  
With their randomness?  
Who left them  
Or gave them leave?  
Where the imprint  
From whom  
The seed?  
Walking as if no hand  
Held a first step  
Nothing to remember  
Nothing to forget  
Vacant eyes  
A house no one lived in  
Without history or compromise.

NB 1970's

## **birthright**

why  
do  
they  
scrape  
and  
bow  
before  
me  
i  
no  
queen  
no  
am  
merely  
fleshed  
in  
white  
therein  
lies  
my royalty

NB 1970's

## **What was I doing with Him?**

What was I doing with him?  
Him....no husband  
I, with, a lover?  
His skin  
Is that what brought me to him?  
Curiosity  
Did I want the feel of a black buck over me?  
A phase  
Did I need a *nigger* lover to haze?  
I, Diana  
Gathering skeins to keep stature?  
A coquette  
Collecting secrets for my eyes to hide?  
My God, the shock to find  
He was alive.

NB 1970's

## **Commuter -Train**

Turkish Taffy, canned Coke  
Concealed like a penis behind the foreskin  
The bag nearly hid the holy water  
Spilling on my shoes  
A face, a boy's  
Intent on meeting mine  
My body tossed about, litter in the gutter  
And I wanted to fall forward  
To have the face against my breast  
The boy, black...seductive  
Looking for a white mother  
And I trying to remember  
Why it was I could not provide.

NB 1970's

## Expectant Motherhood

It's not every mother-to-be  
That churns cornstarch  
In her mouth  
To baste the powder to food  
I stared at pictures  
Botticelli, Renoir  
And listened  
To a steady diet of Bach  
Eating my way  
Through liver and steak  
Never a minute late  
My vitamins taken  
With the precision  
Of a Swiss clock  
I walked miles  
And did more miles of exercises  
Enlightened birth  
A singular project  
She, on my block  
Meaning the other side of earth  
Ate cornstarch  
Until her tongue turned white  
A sour stool  
The contrast reductionism  
Simple thoughts black and white  
None of that  
Shades of gray crap  
In the middle  
She ate it I said  
While I read Grantly Dick-Read  
And squeezed my crotch  
Opened and closed in market lines  
The word had gotten around  
That cornstarch changes black to white  
Lumping into uteri  
No scientific data yet  
The fetus never came to life  
Left without child and without evidence  
She peeks my carriage and asks, *how old.*

NB 1970's

## **Semi-Private Room**

Seconds after he wriggled free  
Purple and pink, he turned black  
Earth before spring grass  
He screamed baby pleas  
Wrenching his neck to find  
What he couldn't see  
Her tit, stiff and alert  
Her hand guided his mouth  
On opposite beds  
Four feeling the same  
I looked away and down  
To the mouth searching me  
Jesus was not feted more  
Cuckoos coronating the King  
Acappella she and I could sound  
For the entire Westminster-Abbey  
Suddenly she looked away  
Her hums stopped  
The baby nearly dropped from her lap  
Her arms stiffened  
In my face a prophecy  
Rapturous for fortunes  
I knew would come to past  
My certainty  
Acid to her birth injury  
She reached down to rip at it  
Her face anguished her eyes out away  
Seconds after he wriggled free  
Her love clicked to hate

NB 1970's



## **At the Urban League**

Sitting in the waiting room  
A picture of interviewee etiquette  
I waited for my appointed job interview  
She waiting too  
My suit seemed shy against her colors  
Blatant and assuming  
She eyed around me  
A surveyor in an unmarked field  
Her thoughts flung  
As from a sling  
Snuggled cat fur in my throat  
I thought  
In black rooms we can forget  
In black rooms lulling to sweet music  
We can love and forget  
Beneath 150 watts  
Warriors lift  
I stood the enemy  
And left corrected.

NB 1070's

## **Godchild**

I told her she was black too old for innocence  
But that it didn't matter to me  
It was her energy, her drive  
That first brought her to my eyes  
(black skin, pig-tails, a pretend-in dress  
found in some grandmother's heirloom attic chest)  
And as if born from my insides  
She became my daughter on a street corner  
While waiting the changing light  
A mother teaches the facts of life  
A mother teaches wrong from right  
I only told her she was black  
As I had told the others they were white  
But they did not storm away  
Leaving me wondering  
*What did I say? What did I say?*  
She had known the difference before meeting me  
But had let me love her just the same

Despite all warning to *keep away!*  
I presumptuous betrayer like all the others  
Did not play by instinct while being her mother  
NB 1970's

### **Wanda**

Wanda, I want to crush you small again  
Like a single atom, a small wet prenatal ball  
And bring you through my narrow channel  
A child born free from my flesh and marrow  
Wanda your hair all confused not straight not curled  
Why do you refuse to let it have its way?  
Your sylvan skin a shimmering mahogany  
Flashes wet and hopeful and no wrinkle  
Yet dares to crease your face  
Wanda my beauty my baby, come fold into my arms  
Back bent and supple feet curled to chest  
I am opened and reaching for your disarming smile  
I am opened and reaching for your disarming smile  
Wanda, Wanda half-frightened half-loving  
Grabbing and wanting and recognizing  
Only kin as flesh and blood  
Have I won a place  
On your carefully delineated family tree?  
Wanda, what fire breathes in your passion?  
What anger what pride  
Your nostrils flare quivers alive  
Yet you are young my baby my child  
So much older and wiser than I, desirous mother  
Ultimately used I'll be reviled denied.

NB 1970's

## Questioning Wanda

Wanda so like a baby curled and sleeping on the rug  
Wanda where is *HE*?  
Why hasn't *HE* come to cut your chains?  
To let my embrace be an embrace  
Not to touch of guilt of pain  
Wanda when will it stop  
When will love be love  
Not the fingering of slayer on slain?  
Wanda when can I be your Mother  
And break your age to its chronological place?  
Wanda when will you shed your skin  
So that I can see your face  
I am *HE*  
I don't let my eyes go that deep.

NB 1970's

## Maude Edwards

Oh Mom  
When I crawl back  
To the white past  
Of your arms  
It is her face  
I see  
J Jet-black near ebony  
And her fingers  
I fell  
Running through my hair  
Cracked and gnarled  
Ancient twigs on a barren tree  
Her back toppled and bent  
From picking up  
After you  
O Mom  
She who held me  
Next to her unobligated heart  
Fed my hunger  
For your love

NB 1970's

## **It Happened in Zurich**

James Baldwin  
Orange chiffon handkerchief  
Orange was never so bright  
Clearing sweat from purebred lips  
In Zurich  
Speaking in English  
Who ever said  
You had to know the words  
To understand  
Heads rolled  
A dance of consent  
For moments  
I thought he spoke  
In German  
*Make love to your past*  
*Make love to your past*  
Over and over  
The words turned  
A brilliant steak  
In high flames  
A chef, extraordinaire  
The cap pleated  
Highest commendation Cordon Bleu  
Some of the best teachers  
Are not masters  
Of their own art  
In Harlem  
An empty spot

NB 1970's

## **Closet Black**

I cannot pull my eyes away  
Riding down 125<sup>th</sup> Street  
Behind walls and windows and storefronts  
I see wild dancing  
To the rhythm of my heartbeat  
My saliva drips  
The smell of blood  
Excites my lips  
My groin is hot  
For bodies crushed  
In wild embraces  
My head too frightened  
To bring in clear images  
Down 125<sup>th</sup> Street  
Where I keep my myths  
Clustered stars at midnight  
Vaults for darkness  
I built the ghetto wall  
Papered graffiti  
Menus to menace by  
Taut black flesh  
Tinted for fantasy  
My fears light the sky  
Nights, I shut my eyes.

NB 1970's

**N----- *Be Black Blues***

*N----- be black!  
My curls I've hid  
Beneath this wig  
How do I look as a blond?*

*N----- be black!  
My babies shouldn't suffer no more  
I heard this cornstarch will turn him white  
This small growing thing still out of sight  
Doctor help me! I think I'm dyin'*

*N----- be black!  
My baby my child  
Come suck awhile  
On some of this mother's milk (cow mother's)  
I want to hold you close n' tight  
But that's like Nigger Mammy's'  
'n that ain't right*

*N----- be black!  
My hair's plastered down with goo baby  
I don't even turn to look at you  
On rainy days got to keep hid  
Case the kinks 'll come back and ruin my lid*

*N----- be black!  
This skin ain't turned white  
Like the cream said it would  
If only it would  
Wouldn't that be good?*

*N----- be black!  
What do you know whitey  
What do you know?  
Be black like pitch like dirt like hell  
It ain't easy being damned before  
You let out that first cry  
And it ain't  
Never gonna change  
I know inside  
So I try 'n look  
Like you whitey  
I hate you whitey  
Let me be whitey*

*In my white whitest reveries  
I puke I writhe  
I scream each nigh  
I drink I steal I kill  
What else a man's got left to do  
When he can't be himself  
And he can't be you?*

*NB  
1970's*

### **Pity the Poor...**

If it's middle class it's bad  
If someone else does it has it  
They've got a good reason  
Troubles are not relative  
They're caste  
The poorer the better  
Fluffed out on sheets  
In a room of my own  
I've got no reason to be sad  
My backs not up against it  
I couldn't change places  
If I wanted to  
My pain hurts me  
If my pain hurts me  
Others might hurt  
From their pain  
My pain is a luxury I eat  
To take seriously  
Must I change color  
And get on *Relief?*  
Were the tables turned  
They would look upon me  
With compassion and anguish  
They with their backs against it  
Have a terrible anger  
But a more terrible love  
It takes money  
To sentimentalize  
And romance  
Hard core  
The they of them  
They seem to take people  
At face value

NB 1970's

## **Black Bourgeoisie**

They disappoint me  
Who climb  
Like ants  
On a steep hill  
After what  
I know  
From experience  
To be  
No good  
Like a Jewish Mother  
Bedecked  
A regular Cleopatra  
Things  
All the while  
Dreaming  
What I might have been  
If...  
My more noble  
Thoughts  
I leave  
For them  
I niggle I push  
I mutter  
Under my breath  
Take my word  
Money isn't everything!

NB  
1970's



## Party Dress

White tights flecked with silver twinkled  
Sparkler on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July after sunset  
In the heat of the Ides of March a record for this day  
Everyone was out on Upper Broadway  
Where had they been  
When this fierce wind blew off the Hudson?  
So many faces like books in the library I would never know  
But one in white tights flecked with silver  
And an over-size blue party dress smocked and ripped  
A funny nose and gooey eyes  
No mother's hand to wipe clean for new assaults  
Upon his skin basted and juice and over done  
A man six feet if one  
And cracked and black like parched earth  
He wandered bleakly without expression  
Neither madman nor wino transvestite nor homosexual  
The usual people who keep Upper Broadway with life  
Just a stillborn child  
Finding himself on the boulevard in a blue party dress  
Not hidden in roles or drink  
No Little Miss Muffet reincarnate  
Just a never was  
Too late to re-mother or remake

NB

1970's

## The Other Mother, Me

The wind shrieks off the Hudson  
I am buried deep in my skin  
Burrowing like a rat in a warm bin of grain  
I hide in my flesh eyes turned in  
Tears blown down my cheek red like stained leather  
On Broadway I became my solitude  
From the corner of my hiding eyes  
A mother pulls a shopping car  
Her face purple black nose flared lips broad  
Her coat tilted off her shoulder  
As if poor hung on a wrack  
Her back stooped to grief  
Sisyphus's rock a pebble to her weight  
Her sweater more to moths than to her cover  
She trudges forth a soldier under orders  
By her side a small child keeps her stride  
More closely tied than an emergent infant  
They push on in an inch of life  
So silent the wind picks up its throat  
To cover up their quiet  
Nailed to their privacy I see tears  
Tears as wet and quick as the rapid current  
Of the Rio Grande, an undertow  
Socking rocks that blocked its need to flow  
Tears bashing cheeks  
There I passing me by  
Reach for the hand of my child by my side  
*You're squeezing me too hard* she cries  
But I need to hold your hand  
The other Mother me or else lose mine

NB  
1970's

## **In My One Life**

In my one life I am small  
But I am kind  
Why should I not be kind  
They only have one life  
They to whom I throw a smile  
Are my brothers and sisters  
We share a mother  
They sky  
Everywhere the sky  
That is why no place is strange  
Everywhere eyes  
Looking at the sky  
Do we struggle because we are small?  
Do we feel alone because we have forgotten?  
How many eyes how many  
Have watched birds and clouds  
I walk in footprints  
They are circles  
My footprints are on the sky  
I smile because I do not feel today  
There is only me alive  
I smile at my old face  
It is important I keep it clear and free  
It will be passed on.

NB  
1970's

*Just because I'm an African with black skin, it doesn't mean that I won't try, he sang.  
Don't tell what I can and can't do, went the refrain, I can change the world.*

*Bill Sellanga, Blink Bill or Doctor Boom part of music group Just A Band*