

A closet crowded with angels



inspired by

Lucille Clifton
François DivaMan Clemmons

*New poems
by
William Henriques*

*To François DivaMan Clemmons
as I prepare to leave Middlebury, Vermont
for pastures unknown
in the last week of May, 2017*

*with deep thanks
and much love*

the BassoAssolutoPoeticus

Cover image – Aaron Douglas – Judgement Day

Contents

1. He told me over a sandwich
2. for the fly who flew into my room
3. the things we white folks did for freedom
4. *In the purple hour*
5. *the pissy river breached the bank*
6. up a road in Vermont
7. *this cave house echoes*

8. where the city ends
9. Eros, Sunday morning
10. *when my tongue*
11. *then*

12. reading some Bible for the first time
13. *the river whispered*
14. *i bathed in bright*
15. *the musicians*
16. *this creamy rose*

17. while drinking a mug of tea

1

he told me over a sandwich

he dreamt of angels
knocking around in the closet
in the narrow hall to the bathroom.
Chile, they made such a ruckus
– Gabriel and all the rest –
they roused him from a deep blue sleep.

he peered out from the covers
and saw they were busy
ferrying pieces of his house
– his books, his paintings, his songs –
along a shimmering footpath
up, out, and in.
Angels, ferrying, up, out, and in.

Lor', what a commotion! he cried,
but sleep lay heavy on his year-weary eyes
and soon he drifted off again.

*only to keep
his little fear
he kills his cities
and his trees*

- Lucille Clifton, "after kent state"

2

*For the fly who flew into my room
yesterday and buzzed round
and round*

I knocked down picture frames
tore up the carpets
broke furniture
to catch the damn buzzing fly
to kill the damn buzzing fly

But her voice whispered:
this rare life
cup it in hand
release this small life
out the window
to the night
and with it,
for a moment
your little fear.

3

the things we white folks did for freedom

home is burning in me

- Lucille Clifton

small pox
slave docks
stolen land
lynching trees

this and more
I found on a half-burnt list
in the wood
beyond the backyard

seems to me
Malcolm had it right
the chickens will be coming soon,
coming home to roost.

4

In the purple hour
the robin song stopped.

I smeared coffee rings across the desk
as the dog woke the house
with her barking
wiping away the whistle of missiles
buildings becoming bread crumbs
the odor of chalky dry fear
the bloody face of a Syrian child
wailing
wailing
wailing.

I drank water
cooked eggs
left the coffee stain
to remember.

5

the pissy river breached the bank
swirled around the trunks of trees

a flood arrived
no prophets or profit
no platforms, politicians, or cruise missiles

just water from the ground
just water from the sky
just a notch in my soul
for another dozen dead in Damascus

6

up a road in Vermont

the saw mill
rots
along the brook

the lumber man
decays
by the wood

log tongs, axes, saws, and chains
rust
where they hang

nobody
remembers
but the mountain

His mind shivers against the rocks

- Lucille Clifton

this cave house echoes
with empty sobs
the dog snoozes by the door

pain on the walls
smudges onto the woodwork
in the deepest corners

they spilt the blood
to carve the rock
so stop shivering

it won't do the rock
no goddamn good
so step outside and into the sun

so even when my fingers tremble

- Lucille Clifton, "joseph"

where the city ends

thin sheets of water
slide up the sand
the last breath of the ocean
stacking itself against the continent

two crows guard a fish
from a throng of gulls
hop hop flap
hop hop flap

a man and a woman dance
flinging their arms to the wind
they twirl and laugh
and twirl and laugh

the wind shines
the sand shines
the water shines
their bodies shine

Eros, Sunday morning

I made love last night
to all the women I've ever known
time vanished in the dark
in the shivering touches
in my fingers like ten pencils
tracing their lines
in their tongues
tracing mine

all my lovers crowded in
they sat on the windowsill
broke the plant pots
lifted the curtain
and let the light
peer across nipples breasts
toward a sacred shadow

Quiet! I cried. Hush now
so they crowded in closer
so I heard the thrumming womb
so the random act became ritual
so I surrendered to thighs
that enveloped me whole

*he don't stumble
even in the lion's den*
- Lucille Clifton

when my tongue
touches you babe
I promise
these three things
walk manly
drink deep
give thanks

11

then
there were no blossoms
just silhouettes
two shivering shadows
the you and the me

now
the bright brown dirt
bursts with blossoms
you are no shadow
I am no shadow

soon
I will suckle
your flower
and make honey
with your nectar

*I have learned
some few things,*

- Lucille Clifton, "daniel"

12

reading some Bible for the first time

on a grey morning
I sought the wisdom song
and read the good book
all at once.

the song stuck in my throat
the book turned to ash
I lost the lessons
for the learning

13

the river whispered
in the clouds
I knelt and kissed
the ground

the river spoke
through the drizzle
so I hammer-cracked
the stone

the river sang
through the storm
so I placed lilacs
on her grave

there was no Jesus
in the passing
just grief
and some river

14

i bathed in bright
alleys of apple blossoms
until the petals fell
until the wind rose
carrying screams

so i ran to the edge
of the orchard
covered in my self
as the raindrops
plunked my back

i dug up this
shivering white lily
gnarled bulb
stringy roots
threw it all to the fire

nothing survived
i cradled muddy ash
in my palm
pressed seeds deep
with my thumb

I stand up
Through your destruction
I stand up
- Lucille Clifton

the musicians
gather in the parking lot
to play a mournful tune

to the river
spilling over banks
to the trees
unfolding tender leaves
to my child
waking up with dawn
to cry for everything
that isn't

the musicians
play standing
through
my destruction
your destruction
our lament

the musicians
stand up
stand tall
stand proud

embarrassing the calm family flowers

- Lucille Clifton

this creamy rose
just beyond the kitchen window
unfurls the morning sun

the petals peel away
from the innermost whorl
thrusting gently
feeding
perfuming
fertilizing

son
display your colors
wildly to the night
let your petals billow unabashed
in the breeze
until bruised
until your scent sours
and ants feast on your tender flesh

forget the calm family flowers
these sterile counters
coffee makers
kitchen windows

forget the calm family flowers
unfurl the morning sun

*Like a man overboard
crying every which way*

- Lucille Clifton, "the white boy"

while drinking a mug of tea

his angels came to me
on the white ceramic rim
I blinked, surprised

one became two
became multitudes
light danced and laughed

sun, snowmelt, and breeze
my mother, my father
the peace and the spider's web

the black and the brown
the blood and the gold
poured into this bitter cup

I closed my eyes
Lord what a blessing! he cried
I sighed an amen and drank deep