

Did I, then, choose bizarritry, having no other choice?

1.

It is 8am. I am in bed, scrolling through Twitter. I have not started my day, but St. Louis is merciless and doesn't care whether I have had a cup of coffee or if I have had my morning masturbation. It is winter and has been for a month too long. The trees outside my window are dead, pale. One scratches my window. I know it is only a matter of time before the little emerald buds appear. But for now, nakedness reigns.

I am naked. I sleep naked. I read poetry in bed naked. I just finished the *Collected Poems of Robert Hayden*. I am somewhat familiar. I was introduced to Hayden in my beginning poetry workshop with CM Burroughs at Columbia College Chicago. The poem, "Those Winter Sundays." I was deeply obsessed with writing about my father then. It seemed appropriate for Burroughs to advise reading that poem. When I first read it, I was taken by the speaker's overall tone towards his father. Something in the line, "No one ever thanked him," seemed utterly stark, frank. I felt a kinship with this speaker and the relationship that held between him and the father. But, it was more than that. It was the father's consistency in his "fatherly duties" even though he was never thanked. The father, through the eyes of the speaker, was sad. Bitter, even, but he kept at being a father. And then the volta: "What did I know, what did I know / of love's austere and lonely offices." Even though the speaker felt "indifferently" towards his father, he admits his ignorance. He is a child.

I wanted to write like that, be stark, frank. Vulnerably ignorant. Over the years, I grew into this vulnerability. In this way, poetry became a genre of artistry that allowed me to completely escape the anxieties of limitations. I was free. Not of my experiences, no, they were part of me. I was free of putting up a front. In "The Truth the Dead Know" by Anne Sexton, she writes: "I am tired of being brave." I was.

2.

I want to talk about the trees. I'm from Seattle and very little trees die during the colder months. The Evergreen State. Seattle, the Emerald City. Outside my window, the trees, the small field, the insects—everything—is dead. I barely remember what the trees looked like alive. Although, as I have mentioned, they are coming to.

I am currently days away from the end of my graduate school career. I attend Washington University in St. Louis. Carl Phillips assigned the *Collected Poems of Robert Hayden* for workshop. Not many were familiar with Hayden. By then, I have read more. However, I was still shaken by what we read. I knew Hayden for poems like, "Night, Death, Mississippi," "A Ballad of Remembrance," "Middle Passage," "Rungate Rungate," "Frederick Douglass," and more of the same. When I read more subtle poems like, "Approximations," or

“The Moose Wallow,” I felt offended. These were poems about nature. Why haven’t I read these poems? Why has nobody introduced me to this side of Hayden? I remember reading—and then it was seconded by Phillips—that Hayden was often condemned by his peers for not writing “black poems.” It’s ironic since most of the poems online by Hayden are what one could consider black poems.

What makes a poem a black poem?

In Langston Hughes’ essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” he writes:

Certainly there is, for the American Negro artist who can escape the restrictions the more advanced among his own group would put upon him, a great field of unused material ready for his art. Without going outside his race, and even among the better classes with their "white" culture and conscious American manners, but still Negro enough to be different, there is sufficient matter to furnish a black artist with a lifetime of creative work. And when he chooses to touch on the relations between Negroes and whites in this country, with their innumerable overtones and undertones surely, and especially for literature and the drama, there is an inexhaustible supply of themes at hand. To these the Negro artist can give his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears.

Words like, “escape,” “advanced,” “furnish,” and “individuality,” stick out to me. Hughes, here, seems to be critiquing black artists who do not explicitly address race in their work and, at the same time, placing them in a higher social class. On some level, I agree with this. If a black artist is “recognized” by white people, their work becomes “accessible” or “worthy” to some extent. The question becomes does the black artist create art that does not address black culture and get recognized: sellout. Or, does the black artist address black culture and risk never being placed in the same conversation with—if we are talking poetry—T.S. Eliot, Jorie Graham, John Ashbery, W.H. Auden, Sylvia Plath, Wallace Stevens, Adrienne Rich, and Louise Glück, to name a few.

3.

Here’s what I love about Robert Hayden: you cannot place him in one category. He refuses to be confined; he is boundless, a crisp winter wind running into the house through an open window and out again through the sliver of space beneath the back door.

There are a few black poets who I place in this category of unboundedness: Carl Phillips, Vieve Francis, Camille T. Dungy, Thylia Moss, Ross Gay, Lucille Clifton—but the question for me remains: what is a black poem? And furthermore, does a black poem need to be defined? In the essay, “A Mere Politics of Being,” Carl Phillips writes:

A poem of mine, “White Dog” has many things to say, I hope, but the basic situation of the poem is as unexciting as follows: a speaker walks his dog, who is white, in a snowstorm, and contemplates unleashing the dog even though he knows the dog — a female, incidentally — won’t come back. At the Q&A afterward (I begin to see the Q&A as a concept itself fraught with potentially political resonance), an African-American woman asked me why the dog in the poem was white. I told her the truth — the dog I owned at the time was white. She seemed dissatisfied, and sat down. But she approached me again at the reception, and insisted that my poem was a critique of white women on the part of a black man, the speaker presumably myself, in control (via the leash) of a whiteness and femaleness that I then considered releasing — hence the poem considered black male enslavement of and ultimate rejection of white femaleness.

I find this interaction very awkward and disrespectful towards Phillips. It’s as if, because Phillips is a black poet, he must only write towards race. How limiting. I don’t, however, think the woman interpreting the poem as being about black male enslavement is wrong. But, what was wrong, I believe, was forcing the poem into one interpretation. Is poetry not made to ignite multiple meanings and conversation?

I take to one my favorite poems, “Ice Storm,” by Robert Hayden:

Unable to sleep, or pray, I stand
by the window looking out
at moonstruck trees a December storm
has bowed with ice.

Maple and mountain ash bend
under its glassy weight,
their cracked branches falling upon
the frozen snow.

The trees themselves, as in winters past,
will survive their burdening,
broken thrive. And am I less to You,
my God, than they?

The poem, for the first eleven lines, is straightforward. The speaker announces their restlessness and goes on describing what they see out their window: trees covered in ice. Nothing attunes us to the quick turn in the eleventh line: “And am I less to You, / my God, than they?” Quickly, the poem addresses the speaker’s anxiety, questioning God as to why, supposedly, the trees are treated better than him. Nothing in the poem, as Phillips says in his essay when talking about a poem by Rita Dove, addresses blackness or tells me to read blackness into it. Does this make the poem less black than another poem of Hayden’s like, “Fredrick Douglass”:

When it is finally ours, this freedom, this liberty, this beautiful
and terrible thing, needful to man as air,
usable as earth; when it belongs at last to all,
when it is truly instinct, brain matter, diastole, systole,
reflex action; when it is finally won; when it is more
than the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians:
this man, this Douglass, this former slave, this Negro
beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning a world
where none is lonely, none hunted, this man
shall be remembered. Oh, not with statues’ rhetoric,
not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze alone,
but with the lives grown out of his life, the lives
fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing.

If these poems were to be placed side by side, one could easily read blackness into “Ice Storm” at the turn to addressing God. “And I am less to You, / my God, than they,” quickly becomes a plead towards God as to why black people are treated less than nature. The critique of lesser value sharpens to the critique of history, politics, and morality. Does this make the poem itself worse? No, I don’t believe so. Does this make the poem better? Again, no.

Likewise, if “Ice Storm” were to be placed next to a more ambiguously queer poem like, “The Wheel,” the poem’s hang-up would switch from blackness to queerness because of these lines from “The Wheel”:

And when, face close to mine,
he murmured that equivocal command,

I went to do his bidding as before.

4.

When talking about masturbation, my best friend said: “Yeah, but you only watch black porn.”

In workshop, the class settles on the “him” the speaker is fucking as a white man because it is a poem about the 2016 election.

Both parties are wrong.

5.

He is a stream slicing through the land’s gaudy hip.

6.

7.

I was once in the camp of “black poets must write towards blackness.” I’ve burned that camp long ago. Blackness isn’t one thing, can’t be one thing. I think of poets like Danez Smith who could be considered as “Black as hell” in their poems. Still, I am uneasy with this description since being black is not singular. What might be more accurate—though, still tarries on binary—is saying Smith welcomes African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) in their poems. Yet, the unsettling still favors even though often I respond with a high-pitch, “YAAAAASSS,” when reading poems such as Smith’s. I admit, I take to Smith’s and others’

poems who sing the song of my friends and family because of the familiarity, the placement of my people in “high” art, and because they’re just so damn pleasant. While interviewing a good friend of mine, Justin Phillip Reed about his debut book, *Indecency*, Reed asks: “Who gets to say what kind of language is or isn’t for singing?”

8.

In the last section of his collected works, “American Journal,” Hayden writes about alienation, restlessness, anxiety, and bewilderment. In these poems, the speaker contemplates their estrangement to the world around them, balancing themes such as; blackness, high art, nature, citizenship, and confinement. In the poem, “Tattooed Man,”—in which I take to be a poem about desire and owning one’s desire—the speaker says, “Born alien, / homeless everywhere, / did I, then, choose / bizarritry, / having no other choice?” It’s as if the speaker is questioning their own identity, or maybe how we choose what identity to attach ourselves to. “Born alien, / homeless everywhere,” is a beautiful statement, saying, “I was never meant to belong—to be boxed in—and nowhere is my home.”

This poem, and other poems like this, for me, creates a space where blackness can stretch its legs. Blackness is bizarre because it does not belong in one category. It can’t. Blackness is as vast as the Pacific Ocean and as arrogant as a bird’s never-ending call. When it hums, I come. When I come, it soars.