

THE SMARTPHONE AND OTHER POEMS

THE SMARTPHONE*

Smartphone Smartphone, burning bright,
In the cities of the night;
What so-mortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant airswept scene,
Burnt thy beckoning touchscreen?
What winged person (Dawn-Juan-Ron)?
What the hand, dare switch it on?

And what genius, & what art,
Could implant a beating heart?
And if that heart begins to beat,
Where the hands? & where the feet?

Whose the hammer? whose the chain,
Yes, a furnace, but whose brain?
Whose the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare the deadly Smartphone clasp!

When Hiroshima went down
And their tears rained to the ground:
Did we smile our work to see?
We didn't make the Lamb, did we?

Smartphone Smartphone burning bright,
In the cities of the night:
What so-mortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

*Adapted from Blake's "The Tyger"

"INEFFABLY DADLIKE" EXCERPT

When I was a child, once or twice a month,
We would visit Dad's mother Thelma.
There was always something off about those visits,
A kind of soul-deadness that emanated from grandma
And pervaded the air around her.
I had the feeling she had given up on life
Though she had a lush garden and baked wonderful pies
And loved her grandchildren dearly.
Her first husband, Dad's father Ingwald,
Died young of heart trouble
Which utterly devastated grandma.
So all three of them went through the wringer
(Four, if you count Ingwald).
You could see it in Dad, in his black moods,
The peremptory harshness that intermittently possessed him.
The wonder was his frequent humor and strength.
I don't know if I could have survived such a childhood.

Years later, when grandma was near death,
She was living with Mom and Dad on the farm.
She had just had a stroke
And Dad was feeding her a bowl of soup.
Grandma kept saying "Oh, that's good, that's good,"
Apparently shocked into appreciation by illness.
Dad's comment summed up their relationship:
"That's the only thing I ever did that the old lady liked."
But the one time I saw him cry was after her death.

THE SHADE THEY CAST*

Four hundred years ago,
A tree grew on an African riverbank.
The trunk was a dark-skinned woman
Whose arms formed two of the branches.
She was tall and statuesque,
Yet limber as a sapling.
Her face did not *show* strength;
It *was* strength.
Her kinky hair was long and thick.
It wound around the branches
And trailed to the ground like black moss.
Her eyes were ageless and without fear.

From her womb grew females
Who formed a grove around her.
In the hot sunlight,
Their green leaves were cool
And the shade they cast was welcome.
The women talked and laughed together,
Happy in their friendship
And needing no one else.

The women wanted to stay near their mother,
To bask in her love and care.
But some – no, many – were kidnapped
And shipped to countries far away
Shipped in pain and fear and anguish
To work as slaves for light-skinned people.
Like trees ripped from the ground,
Their severed roots aching for their country's earth,
They remembered from where they had come.
But, strong like their mother,
They knew how to adapt
And they formed bonds, had children,
Made lives in their new home.
Like the topmost leaves of a tall tree,
Some part of them saw down time's curve
To a better future
And they told their children,
*“Be patient, work hard, know God,
For a great day is coming,
A day that will justify our suffering.”*

Until recently, a woman named Michelle
Lived in the capital city

Of the country that stole her forebears.
Her skin was dark; her arms were bare.
She was tall and moved with grace,
And though her hair was short,
It put me in mind of black moss.
Her husband was the President,
And they have two beautiful girls.
Her mother, who raised her to be fearless,
Lived with the family.
What a long journey it has been -
From the African riverbank,
To the slave ships heavy with their load,
To the cotton fields baking in the sun,
To the Civil War, to Reconstruction,
To the black migration, the slow heavy flow from South to North,
To the Struggle which took the lives of black and white heroes -
To reach this moment.

I do not know Michelle
But I see her in my mind's eye
Inside the White House,
Laughing with mother and children
On a summer evening.
Outside the grass is clipped short
With that wonderful new-mown smell.
A lamp with a golden base
Spills its friendly light on the family.
They seem to form a unity,
Like a grove of trees,
And the shade they cast is welcome.

*Inspired by the drawing "Untitled" by Pascale Monnine

FOR OUR FUTURE

I remember walking across the bridge that day
To where the school crouched in the summer heat -
A small school in a mid-sized city,
But the city felt small too.
Children filled the classroom
Rejects from the first grade,
With hope and fear warring in their faces.
It was a summer class for problem readers.
I felt no anger as I listened to them read,
Stumbling over one-syllable words.
I felt no shame as the teacher squatted beside me -
I who was six and could read at four -
And asked "*What are you doing here?*"
I felt no pain as I smiled into his puzzled face
And replied, "*My mother says I read too fast*".

My first-grade teacher had informed my mother of this,
And had predicted social catastrophe if it were not remedied.
No appreciation for an intelligent first-grade female?
Not in 1960 in Tacoma, Washington, in the heart of my teacher.
How I wish my mother had told her to fuck off
And skipped me ahead a grade.
It would have done wonders for my self-esteem, then and later.
But there were certain segments of society that my mother listened to,
And the educational system was one of them.
When I asked her about the summer-school decision,
She spoke of social catastrophe, with remembered fear in her voice.
The fact that I was not seen still escapes her.
My mother is a wonderful woman,
And it would be churlish to hold this against her.
But I can't forget it either, or how it shaped me.

So to reiterate,
I felt no pain when saying "*My mother says I read too fast.*"
But the pain was there,
Pulsing unfelt just below the surface,
Like a land mine waiting to explode
Like a razor blade on scarred flesh
Like a thousand drugged days

And a thousand drunken nights,
Like a little girl crying
In a schoolroom corner.

Being a poet,
You might say it's my job to write about this,
So that people understand what happens
In the heart of an unseen child.
This poem is for the girls, for the boys,
For all the gifted, unique children of the world;
For our future.

BODY AND SOUL TOGETHER

I.

It was a strong, pure current when I was a child;
My sexuality.
I didn't feel it all the time
But when the moment was right, there it was,
Making my legs weak
Suffusing me with pleasure.
There was no future and no past
Just this feeling, right here, right now.
There wasn't much guilt
Although I knew not to tell my parents,
An intuition hard-wired into the young.
I had read about the double standard
But had not experienced it, not then.
So the feeling was untinged with doubt or consequence.
How lucky we are to possess this ability;
To remember sensations fifty years after having them.
I associated my sexuality with freedom:
My right to experiment,
To let my body do what it did. To be whole:
Not body and soul separate
But *body and soul together*.
How could such a wonderful thing be misused?

II.

When I was ten years old
I read a book about a woman
Who sought pleasure with various men.
She later fell in love
And regretted her carnal knowledge.
I remember reading the book and thinking,
"This is utter bullshit."
But six years later, when I fell in love
(Or what passed for it)
I believed what my boyfriend told me,
That I was too sexual.
Had I been less dazzled

I would have seen his words for what they were:
A sign that we were mismatched.
So my childhood experience of sex
Was how good it felt.
My teenage experience of sex
Was that it shouldn't feel good to females.
I left my first love and reclaimed my body.
He was my inoculation against the sex-is-evil germ;
I would never suffer that particular illness again.

III.

I don't have sex now
Because I've learned that the political becomes the personal.
How can an untrustworthy society
Produce anyone I can trust?
So I keep my riches to myself.
I feasted for a long tiime
And I can fast even longer,
For the rest of this life if need be.
My body, my choice to give or withhold it.
I refrain from sex now for the same reason I indulged:
Body and soul together.
And I have my memories:
Lying on the ledge in the cluttered garage
With his body probing mine
And his voice in my ear
And my vagina throbbing
And my mind holding the moment
Knowing I would never forget.