

To Return

In the South
No, I mean the *deep* South
Where the air is so thick with sugar water you can taste it
On your skin.
Where all the women comment
On how the humid kiss of spring frizzes up their hair
But secretly love the soft freedom
Of wild tresses under backyard skies and palm leaves.

Yes, in the deepest South
I used to live for the ribbons of ruddy clay
Which caked the sidewalks after early morning showers' mist
And the sunbaked cracks that crisscrossed and stitched through barefoot cement.
The scream of cicadas and
The scream of little voices
When the glisten-eyed beetles splayed their shiny wings
And alighted on shoulders unawares.

Yes, in palm trees and hot grass still green
Where the water godlike is
Infinite and basking gold, hinting silver, breathing blue
Under the glory of sky's halo.
No surf, just smooth swell after swell after swell
Like an outstretched hand
That warmly whispers, "Come and see."

I have waited so long to return
To sweat-slick foreheads
Lounging with something to fan with in one hand
Sleepy, half-lidded eyes in the other
Toes buried in cooling layers of powdered sand
Quick-legged sandpipers darting their way through banks of foam
And the sun dousing its last fire in the curve of the horizon.

Like this, I am suspended
My conscious beaded with sugar water
Drops leave candied trails across my mind
My skin all mossed-over with green fur in patches
The prickles of velveteen fly tongues softly sipping in my nectar.
The water glows with inner flame
As I float over leagues and leagues of that Deep and Southern.
So long I have been away from you
No more.

Our Shared Jungle, Mr. Conrad

Mr. Conrad
your words have long since
been beaten drums to coax
the palm fronds, vine furls, dark and green
from the murky jungle of my mind.

Believe me when I say
your Horrors whisper wonder
from your pages thick entwined
with roots in soils dark as skin,
these roots embed in me;
but you stand in separation, sir,
in costume suits as white
as all the devils that herein
dance your beat semantic.

Drumming, as you are,
on the door of time gone by
with that lovely mistress, Fiction,
who is kind to lay her lips.
And in this moment, you are righteous.
And on this woman, at your side
you imagine naked breasts
feathers flayed and splayed
with a heart as wild as your sea,

but Mr. Conrad,

you are a head floating above white lapels
steam-pressed pants, a belt of leather,
and shoes of cannibal skin.

The natives said it better
to your disciple Marlow,
but now it begs repeating:

No borders, leaves, or darkness
breed the savage side of man,
Mr. Conrad,
the jungle lies within.

The Witness

This ratchety ceiling fan,
when on, is jerking in its motion
as once-sleek blades now with corners rusted
spin in dulled-silver's blurred whirl winds.
A tarnished ball chain with dangled tassel
sharply tugged, now careening to this and that
like tethered hound in open field.
And though its screws threaten
to loose their load on wary passers-by,
it churns the air with the full passion
of its year of manufacture.

Long ago, it was clutched to the plaster
above a well-used motel bed.
Under its feverous flurry happened many an affair
between humans bare and humans dressed
who all slithered sleepy 'neath the sheets
for some odd business immaterial.

Then some many years thereafter,
a diner held its rattling screws
over patrons hungering to be cooled,
to rest-up easy and to quench
their avid itches for fryer fat
and milkshakes labeled "chocolate".

Then in midst of summer
its clanking rhythm doused the embers
of some back-end alley pawn shop
with barred windows and blue-crossed flags
and guns and powder and from far-off sirens
came broken glass and a long night flashing red to blue.

Now somewhere, the sharply tugged ball chain
swings in new surroundings,
wings of roughened rust and scrap-metal
fly above well-smoothed concrete,
and what display of appetite
will this humble witness
have the privilege
of providing its services to
next?

The Valley

The sun was determined to make this summer afternoon
Sweat
like a glass of iced tea
Droop
like a runny ice cream cone
Just sweet enough to savor
Just cold enough to relish

But the sun was no threat to Ms. Washington
No siree
No ma'am
The sun was no match for Ms. Washington and her hand fan
With one stroke of that fan
Lord
She could freeze the humidity right out of the air and make it snow in Alabama
With one sway of her porch rocking chair
Lord
She could spin the Earth and make Sunday come early

She had done powerful things in her time
Yes siree
Yes ma'am
Why, she had won Best Pecan Pie in Macon County at only fifteen
Not only that
She had handcrafted and given life
to the three most well-behaved boys in Macon County too
She had worked a job in Montgomery
a nickel to his dime
and provided what she could
She never missed a shift
Bought her boys one of them spiffy polaroids

Not only that
She sat at the front of the bus
Went through the front door
Watched movies in the front row

She didn't have a car
Or any good walking shoes
So she walked from Selma to Montgomery
Three times in the only shoes she had
Her Sunday shoes
And on March seventh, nineteen-sixty-five
She stood her ground in Sunday shoes
Cried hard for forgotten lives in Sunday shoes

But still those shoes
Were all shine and polish

No siree
No ma'am
The determined sun did not put a damper on Ms. Washington's summer afternoon

But he did
He sat beside her
All squared angles and sharp features
He was the shadow in her summer valley
She could not
With all her power
Think him away

He sat at the back of the bus
Slithered through the back door
Watched her from the back row

He walked with her from Selma to Montgomery three times
Hidden behind clasped hands
She could not shake him

He pierced her with every downturned glance
Bled from every pair of smiling lips
Watched her little boys
Grasped at her hands with his bony fingers
Laughed at her undone hair
He had blue eyes like two suns
Sweltering

But he was here now
Beside her
Close

He asked her,
"Are you ready?"
She stopped her waving
Let the hand fan sit like an old cat on her lap
She swayed in that porch rocking chair
Swayed back and forth squinting up at that determined sun
Hanging low

"Always."