

AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Lucille Clifton

Admonitions

boys
I don't promise you nothing
but this
what you pawn
I will redeem
what you steal
I will conceal
my private silence too
your public guilt
is all I got

girls
first time a white man
opens his fly
like a good thing
we'll just laugh
laugh real loud my
black women

children
when they ask you
why is your mama so funny
say
she is a poet
she don't have no sense

[1969]

The Way It Was

mornings
i got up early
greased my legs

straightened my hair and
walked quietly out

not touching

in the same place
the tree the lot
the poolroom deacon moore
everything was stayed

nothing changed
(nothing remain the same)
I walked out quietly
mornings
in the '40s
a nice girl
not touching
trying to be white

[1972]

Song At Midnight

Brothers,
this big woman
carries much sweetness
in the folds of her flesh.

Her hair
is white with wonderful.

She is
rounder than the moon
and far more faithful.

Brothers,
who will hold her,
who will find her beautiful
if you do not?

Wishes for Sons

i wish them cramps.
i wish them a strange town
and the last tampon.
i wish them no 7-11.

i wish them one week early
and wearing a white skirt,
i wish them one week late.

later i wish them hot flashes
and clots like you
wouldn't believe. let the
flashes come when they
meet someone special.
let the clots come
when they want to.

let them think they have accepted
arrogance in the universe,
then bring them to gynecologists
not unlike themselves.

[1991]

Reply

[from a letter written to Dr. W.E.B. Dubois by Alvin Borgquest of Clark University in Massachusetts and dated April 3, 1905:

“We are pursuing an investigation here on the subject of crying us an expression of the emotions, and should like very much to learn about its peculiarities among the colored people. We have been referred to you as a person competent to give us information on the subject. We desire especially to know about the following aspects: I. Whether the Negro sheds tears ...”

reply

he do
she do
they live

they love
they try
they tire
they flee
they fight
they bleed
they break
they moan
they mourn
they weep
they die
they do
they do
they do

[1991]

June Jordan

Case in Point

A friend of mine who raised six daughters and
who never wrote what she regards as serious
until she
was fifty-three
tells me there is no silence peculiar
to the female

* * *

I have decided I have something to say
about female silence: so to speak
these are my 2c on the subject:
2 weeks ago I was raped for the second
time in my life the first occasion
being a whiteman and the most recent
situation being a blackman actually
head of the local NAACP

Today is 2 weeks after the fact

of that man straddling
his knees either side of my chest
his hairy arm and powerful left hand
forcing my arms and my hands over my head
flat to the pillow while he rammed
What he described as his quote big dick
unquote into my mouth
and shouted out: “D’ya want to swallow
my big dick; well, do ya?”

He was being rhetorical.
My silence was peculiar
to the female.

[1980]

Poem About My Rights

Even tonight and I need to take a walk and clear
my head about this poem about why I can’t
go out without changing my clothes my shoes
my body posture my gender identity my age
my status as a woman alone in the evening/
alone on the streets/alone not being the point/
the point being that I can’t do what I want
to do with my own body because I am the wrong
sex the wrong age the wrong skin and
suppose it was not here in the city but down on the beach/
or far into the woods and I wanted to go
there by myself thinking about God/or thinking
about children or thinking about the world/all of it
disclosed by the stars and the silence:
I could not go and I could not think and I could not
stay there
alone
as I need to be
alone because I can’t do what I want to do with my own
body and
who in the hell set things up
like this
and in France they say if the guy penetrates
but does not ejaculate then he did not rape me

and if after stabbing him if after screams if
after begging the bastard and if even after smashing
a hammer to his head if even after that if he
and his buddies fuck me after that
then I consented and there was
no rape because finally you understand finally
they fucked me over because I was wrong I was
wrong again to be me being me where I was/wrong
to be who I am
which is exactly like South Africa
penetrating into Namibia penetrating into
Angola and does that mean I mean how do you know if
Pretoria ejaculates what will the evidence look like the
proof of the monster jackboot ejaculation on Blackland
and if
after Namibia and if after Angola and if after Zimbabwe
and if after all of my kinsmen and women resist even to
self-immolation of the villages and if after that
we lose nevertheless what will the big boys say will they
claim my consent:
Do You Follow Me: We are the wrong people of
the wrong skin on the wrong continent and what
in the hell is everybody being reasonable about
and according to the *Times* this week
back in 1966 the C.I.A. decided that they had this problem
and the problem was a man named Nkrumah so they
killed him and before that it was Patrice Lumumba
and before that it was my father on the campus
of my Ivy League school and my father afraid
to walk into the cafeteria because he said he
was wrong the wrong age the wrong skin the wrong
gender identity and he was paying my tuition and
before that
it was my father saying I was wrong saying that
I should have been a boy because he wanted one/a
boy and that I should have been lighter skinned and
that I should have had straighter hair and that
I should not be so boy crazy but instead I should
just be one/a boy and before that
it was my mother pleading plastic surgery for
my nose and braces for my teeth and telling me

to let the books loose to let them loose in other words

I am very familiar with the problems of the C.I.A. and the problems of South Africa and the problems of Exxon Corporation and the problems of white America in general and the problems of the teachers and the preachers and the F.B.I. and the social workers and my particular Mom and Dad/I am very familiar with the problems because the problems turn out to be me

I am the history of rape

I am the history of the rejection of who I am

I am the history of the terrorized incarceration of my self

I am the history of battery assault and limitless armies against whatever I want to do with my mind and my body and my soul and whether it's about walking out at night or whether it's about the love that I feel or whether it's about the sanctity of my vagina or the sanctity of my national boundaries or the sanctity of my leaders or the sanctity of each and every desire that I know from my personal and idiosyncratic and indisputably single and singular heart I have been raped be-

cause I have been wrong the wrong sex the wrong age the wrong skin the wrong nose the wrong hair the wrong need the wrong dream the wrong geographic the wrong sartorial I

I have been the meaning of rape

I have been the problem everyone seeks to eliminate by forced

penetration with or without the evidence of slime and/ but let this be unmistakable this poem is not consent I do not consent

to my mother to my father to the teachers to

the F.B.I. to South Africa to Bedford-Stuy

to Park Avenue to American Airlines to the hardon

idlers on the corners to the sneaky creeps in cars

I am not wrong: Wrong it no my name

My name is my own my own my own

and I can't tell you who the hell sec things up like this

but I can tell you that from now on my resistance

my simple and daily and nightly self-determination

may very well cost you your life

[1980]

The Female and the Silence of a Man

(cf. *W. B. Yeats's "Leda and the Swan"*)

And now she knows: The big fist shattering her face.

Above, the sky conceals the sadness of the moon.

And windows light, doors close, against all trace

of her: She falls into the violence of a woman's ruin.

How should she rise against the plunging of his lust?

She vomits out her teeth. He tears the slender legs apart.

The hairy torso of his rage destroys the soft last bastion
of her trust.

He lacerates her breasts. He claws and squeezes out her heart:

She sinks into a meadow pond of lilies and a swan.

She floats above an afternoon of music from the trees.

She vanishes like blood that people walk upon.

She reappears: A mad bitch dog that reason cannot seize;

A fever withering the river and the crops:

A lovely girl protected by her cruel/incandescent energies.

[1989]

Alice Walker

from Color Purple

You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy.

Dear God,

I am fourteen years old. ~~I am~~ I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me.

Last spring after little Lucious come I heard them fussing. He was pulling on her arm. She say It too soon, Fonso, I ain't well. Finally he leave her alone. A week go by, he puffing on her arm again. She say Naw, I ain't gonna. Can't you see I'm already half dead, an all of these children.

She went to visit her sister doctor over Macon. Left me to see after the others. He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't. First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it.

But I don't never git used to it. And now I feels sick every time I be the one to cook. My mama she fuss at me an look at me. She happy, cause he good to her now. But too sick to last long.

Dear God,

My mama dead. She die screaming and cussing. She scream at me. She cuss at me. I'm big. I can't move fast enough. By time I git back from the well, the water be warm. By time I git the tray ready the food be cold. By time I git all the children ready for school it be dinner time. He don't say nothing. He set there by the bed holding her hand an cryin, talking bout don't leave me, don't go.

She ast me bout the first one Whose it is? I say God's. I don't know no other man or what else to say. When I start to hurt and then my stomach start moving and then that little baby come out my pussy chewing on it fist you could have knock me over with a feather.

Don't nobody come see us.

She got sicker an sicker.

Finally she ast Where it is?

I say God took it.

He took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods. Kill this one too, if he can.

Dear God,

He act like he can't stand me no more. Say I'm evil an always up to no good. He took my other little baby, a boy this time. But I don't think he kilt it. I think he sold it to a man an his wife over Monticello. I got breasts full of milk running down myself. He say Why don't you look decent? Put on something. But what I'm sposed to put on? I don't have nothing.

I keep hoping he fine somebody to marry. I see him looking at my little sister. She scared. But I say I'll take care of you. With God help.

Dear God,

He come home with a girl from round Gray. She be my age but they married. He be on her all the time. She walk round like she don't know what hit her. I think she thought she love him. But he got so many of us. All needing somethin.

My little sister Nettie is got a boyfriend in the same shape almost as Pa. His wife died. She was kilt by her boyfriend coming home from church. He got only three children though.

He seen Nettie in church and now every Sunday evening here come Mr.— I tell Nettie to keep at her books. It be more then a notion taking care of children ain't even yourn. And look what happen to Ma.

Dear God,

He beat me today cause he say I winked at a boy in church. I may have got somethin in my eye but I didn't wink. I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them. Maybe cause my mama cuss me you think I kept mad at her. But I ain't. I felt sorry for mama. Trying to believe his story kilt her.

Sometime he still be looking at Nettie, but I always git in his light. Now I tell her to many Mr.— I don't tell her why. I say Marry him, Nettie, an try to have one good year out your life. After that, I know she be big.

But me, never again. A girl at church say you git big if you bleed every month. I don't bleed no more.

Dear God,

Mr.— finally come right out an ast for Nettie hand in marriage. But He won't let her go. He say she too young, no experience. Say Mr.— got too many children already. Plus What about the scandal his wife cause when somebody kill her? And what about all this stuff he hear bout Shug Avery? What bout that?

I ast our new mammy bout Shug Avery. What it is? I ast. She don't know but she say she gon fine out.

She do more then that. She git a picture. The first one of a real person I ever seen. She say Mr.— was taking somethin out his billfold to show Pa an it fell out an slid under the table.

Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty then my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier then me. I see her there in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like somethin tail. She grinning with her foot up on somebody motocar. Her eyes serious tho. Sad some.

I ast her to give me the picture. An all night long I stare at it. An now when I dream, I dream of Shug Avery. She be dress to kill, whirling an laughing.

Dear God,

I ast him to take me instead of Nettie while our new mammy sick. But he just ast me what I'm talking bout. I tell him I can fix myself up for him. I duck into my room and come out

wearing horsehair, feathers, and a pair of our new mammy high heel shoes. He beat me for dressing trampy but he do it to me anyway.

Mr.— come that evening. I'm in the bed crying. Nettie she finally see the light of day, clear. Our new mammy she see it too. She in her room crying. Nettie tend to first one, then the other. She so scared she go out doors and vomit. But not out front where the two mens is.

Mr.— say, Well Sir, I sure hope you done change your mind.

He say, Naw, Can't say I is.

Mr.— say, Well, you know, my poor little ones sure could use a mother.

Well, He say, real slow, I can't let you have Nettie. She too young. Don't know nothing but what you tell her. Sides, I want her to git some more schooling. Make a schoolteacher out of her. But I can let you have Celie. She the oldest anyway. She ought to marry first. She ain't fresh tho, but I spect you know that. She spoiled.

'Itwice. But you don't need a fresh woman no how. I got a fresh one in there myself and she sick all the time. He spit, over the railing. The children git on her nerve, she not much of a cook. And she big already.

Mr.— he don't say nothing. I stop crying I'm so surprise.

She ugly. He say. But she ain't no stranger to hard work.

And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it.

Mr.— still don't say nothing. I take out the picture of Shug Avery. I look into her eyes. Her eyes say Yeah, it bees that way sometime.

Fact is, he say, I got to git rid of her. She too old to be living here at home. And she a bad influence on my other girls. She'd come with her own linen. She can take that cow she raise down there back of the crib. But Nettie you flat out can't have. Not now. Not never.

Mr.— finally speak. Clearing his throat. I ain't never really look at that one, he say.

Well, next time you come you can look at her. She ugly. Don't even look like she kin to Nettie. But she'll make the better wife. She ain't smart either, and I'll just be fair, you have to watch her or she'll give away everything you own. But she can work like a man.

Mr.— say How old she is?

He say, She near twenty. And another thing—She tell lies.

Dear God,

It took him the whole spring, from March to June, to make up his mind to take me. All I thought about was Nettie. How she could come to me if I marry him and he be so lave struck with her I could figure out a way for us to run away. Us both be hitting Nettie's schoolbooks pretty hard, cause us know we got to be smart to git away. I know I'm not as pretty or as smart as Nettie, but she say I ain't dumb.

The way you know who discover America, Nettie say, is think bout cucumbers. That what Columbus sound like. I learned all about Columbus in first grade, but look like he the first thing I forgot. She say Columbus come here in boats call the Neater, the Peter, and the Santomareater. Indians so nice to him he force a bunch of 'em back home with him to wait on the queen.

But it hard to think with gitting married to Mr.— hanging over my head.

The first time I got big Pa took me out of school. He never care that I love it. Nettie stood there at the gate holding tight to my hand. I was all dress for first day. You too dumb to keep going to school, Pa say. Nettie the clever one in this bunch.

But Pa, Nettie say, crying, Celie smart too. Even Miss Beasley say so. Nettie dote on Miss Beasley. Think nobody like her in the world.

Pa say, Whoever listen to anything Addie Beasley have to say. She run off at the mouth so much no man would have her. That how come she have to teach school. He never look up fromcleaning his gun. Pretty soon a bunch of white mens come walking cross the yard. They have guns too.

Pa git up and follow 'em. The rest of the week I vomit and dress wild game.

But Nettie never give up. Next thing I know Miss Beasley at our house trying to talk to Pa. She say long as she been a teacher she never know nobody want to learn bad as Nettie and me. But when Pa call me out and she see how tight my dress is, she stop talking and go.

Nettie still don't understand. I don't neither. All us notice is I'm all the time sick and fat.

I feel bad sometime Nettie done pass me in leamin. But look like nothing she say can git in my brain and stay. She try to tell me something bout the ground not being flat. I just say, Yeah, like I know it. I never tell her how flat it look to me.

Mr.— come finally one day looking all drug out. The woman he had helping him done quit. His mammy done said No More.

He say, Let me see her again.

Pa call me. Celie, he say. Like it wasn't nothing. Mr.— want another look at you.
I go stand in the door. The sun shine in my eyes. He's still up on his horse. He look
me up and down.
Pa rattle his newspaper. Move up, he won't bite, he say.
I go closer to the steps, but not too close cause I'm a little scared of his horse.
Turn round, Pa say.
I turn round. One of my little brothers come up. I think it was Lucious. He fat and
playful, all the time munching on something.
He say, What you doing that for?
Pa say, Your sister thinking bout marriage.
Didn't mean nothing to him. He pull my dresstail and ast can he have some
blackberry jam out the safe.
I say, Yeah.
She good with children, Pa say, rattling his paper open more. Never heard her say a
hard word to nary one of them. Just give 'em everything they ast for, is the only
problem.
Mr.— say, That cow still coming?
He say, Her cow.

Dear God,
I spend my wedding day running from the oldest boy. He twelve. His mama died in
his arms and he don't want to hear nothing bout no new one. He pick up a rock and
laid my head
open. The blood run all down tween my breasts. His daddy say Don't do that! But
that's all he say. He got four children, instead of three, two boys and two girls. The
girls hair ain't been comb since their mammy died. I tell him I'll just have to shave it
off. Start fresh. He say bad luck to cut a woman hair. So after I bandage my head best
I can and cook dinner—they have a spring, not a well, and a wood stove look like a
truck—I start trying to untangle hair. They only six and eight and they cry. They
scream. They cuse me of murder. By ten o'clock I'm done. They cry theirselves to
sleep. But I don't cry. I lay there thinking bout Nettie while he on top of me, wonder
if she safe. And then I think bout Shug Avery. I know what he doing to me he done to
Shug Avery and maybe she like it. I put my arm around him.