

THE DIFFICULT MIRACLE OF BLACK POETRY IN AMERICA OR SOMETHING LIKE A SONNET FOR PHILLIS WHEATLEY

June Jordan

IT WAS NOT NATURAL. And she was the first. Come from a country of many tongues tortured by rupture, by theft, by travel like mismatched clothing packed down into the cargo hold of evil ships sailing, irreversibly, into slavery; come to a country where, to be docile and dumb, to be big and breeding, easily, to be turkey/horse/cow to be cook/carpenter/plow to be 5'6" 140 lbs. in good condition and answering to the name of Tom or Mary; to be bed bait; to be legally spread legs for rape by the master/the master's son/the master's overseer/the master's visiting nephew; to be nothing human nothing family nothing from nowhere nothing that screams nothing that weeps nothing that dreams nothing that keeps anything/anyone deep in your heart; to live forcibly illiterate forcibly itinerant; to live eyes lowered head bowed; to be worked without rest to be worked without pay to be worked without thanks to be worked day up to nightfall; to be 3/5ths of a human being at best: to be this valuable, this hated thing among strangers who purchased your life and then cursed it unceasingly: to be a slave: to be a slave: come to this country a slave and how should you sing? After the flogging the lynch rope the general terror and weariness what should you know of a lyrical life? How could you, belonging to no one, but property to those despising the smiles of your soul, how could you dare to create yourself: A poet?

A poet can read. A poet can write.

A poet is African in Africa, or Irish in Ireland, or French on the Left Bank of Paris, or white in Wisconsin. A Poet writes in her own language. A poet writes of her own people, her own history, her own vision, her own room, her own house where she sits at her own table quietly placing one word after another word until she builds a line and a movement and an image and a meaning that somersaults all of these into the singing, the absolutely individual voice of the poet: At liberty. A poet is somebody free. A poet is someone at home.

How should there be Black poets in America?

It was not natural. And she was the first. In 1761, so far back before the revolution that produced these United States, so far back before the concept of freedom disturbed the insolent crimes of this continent, in 1761, when seven year old Phillis stood, as she must, when she stood nearly naked, as small as a seven year old, by herself, standing on land at

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last, at last, after the long, annihilating horrors of the middle Passage. Phillis, standing on the auctioneer's rude platform: Phillis For Sale:

Was it a nice day?

Does it matter? Should she muse on the sky or remember the sea? Until then Phillis had been somebody's child. Now she was about to become somebody's slave.

Suzannah and John Wheatley finished their breakfast and ordered the carriage brought round. They would ride to the auction. This would be an important outing. They planned to buy yet another human being to help with the happiness of their comfortable life in Boston. You don't buy a human being, you don't purchase a slave, without thinking ahead. So they had planned this excursion. They were dressed for the occasion, and excited, probably. And experienced, certainly. The Wheatleys already owned several slaves. They had done this before; the transaction would not startle or confound or embarrass or appall either one of them.

Was it a nice day?

When the Wheatleys arrived at the auction they greeted their neighbors, they enjoyed this business of mingling with other townfolk politely shifting about the platform, politely adjusting positions for gain of a better view of the bodies for sale. The Wheatleys were good people. They were kind people. They were openminded and thoughtful. They looked at the bodies for sale. They looked and they looked. This one could be useful for that. That one might be useful for this. But then they looked at that child, that black child standing nearly naked, by herself. Seven or eight years old, at the most, and frail. Now that was a different proposal! Not a strong body, not a grown set of shoulders, not a promising wide set of hips, but a little body, a delicate body, a young, surely terrified face! John Wheatley agreed to the whim of his wife, Suzannah. He put in his bid. He put down his cash. He called out the numbers. He competed successfully. He had a good time. He got what he wanted. He purchased yet another slave. He bought that Black girl standing on the platform, nearly naked. He gave this new slave to his wife and Suzannah Wheatley was delighted. She and her husband went home. They rode there by carriage. They took that new slave with them. An old slave commanded the horses that pulled the carriage that carried the Wheatleys home, along with the new slave, that little girl they named Phillis.

Why did they give her that name?

Was it a nice day?

Does it matter?

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It was not natural. And she was the first: Phillis Miracle: Phillis Miracle Wheatley: The first Black human being to be published in America. She was the second female to be published in America.

And the miracle begins in Africa. It was there that a bitterly anonymous man and a woman conjoined to create this genius, this lost child of such prodigious aptitude and such beguiling attributes that she very soon interposed the reality of her particular, dear life between the Wheatley's notions about slaves and the predictable outcome of such usual blasphemies against Black human beings.

Seven-year-old Phillis changed the slaveholding Wheatleys. She altered their minds. She entered their hearts. She made them see her and when they truly saw her, Phillis, darkly amazing them with the sweetness of her spirit and the alacrity of her forbidden, strange intelligence, they, in their own way, loved her as a prodigy, as a girl mysterious but godly.

Sixteen months after her entry into the Wheatley household Phillis was talking the language of her owners. Phillis was fluently reading The Scriptures. At eight and a half years of age, this Black child, or "Afric's Muse," as she would later describe herself, was fully literate in the language of this slaveholding land. She was competent and eargerly asking for more: more books, more and more information. And Suzannah Wheatley loved this child of her whimsical good luck. It pleased her to teach and to train and to tutor this Black girl, this Black darling of God. And so Phillis delved into kitchen studies commensurate, finally, to a classical education available to young white men at Harvard.

She was nine years old.

What did she read? What did she memorize? What did the Wheatleys give to this African child? Of course, it was white, all of it: White. It was English, most of it, from England. It was written, all of it, by white men taking their pleasure, their walks, their pipes, their pens and their paper, rather seriously, while somebody else cleaned the house, washed the clothes, cooked the food, watched the children: Probably not slaves, but possibly a servant, or, commonly, a wife: It was written, this white man's literature of England, while somebody else did the other things that have to be done. And that was the literature absorbed by the slave, Phillis Wheatley. That was the writing, the thoughts, the nostalgia, the lust, the conceits, the ambitions, the mannerisms, the games, the illusions, the discoveries, the filth and the flowers that filled up the mind of the African child.

At fourteen, Phillis published her first poem, "To the University of Cambridge": Not a brief limerick or desultory, teenager's verse, but 32

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lines of blank verse telling those fellows what for and whereas, according to their own strict Christian codes of behavior. It is in that poem that Phillis describes the miracle of her own Black poetry in America:

While an intrinsic ardor bids me write
the muse doth promise to assist my pen

She says that her poetry results from “an intrinsic ardor,” not to dismiss the extraordinary kindness of the Wheatleys, and not to diminish the wealth of white men’s literature with which she found herself quite saturated, but it was none of these extrinsic factors that compelled the labors of her poetry. It was she who created herself a poet, notwithstanding and in despite of everything around her.

Two years later, Phillis Wheatley, at the age of sixteen, had composed three additional, noteworthy poems. This is one of them, “On Being Brought from Africa to America”:

Tw’as mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there’s a God, that there’s a Savior too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
“Their color is a diabolic die.”
Remember, *Christians*, Negroes, black as Cain,
May be refin’d, and join the angelic train.

Where did Phillis get these ideas?

It’s simple enough to track the nonsense about herself “benighted”: *benighted* means surrounded and preyed upon by darkness. That clearly reverses what had happened to that African child, surrounded by and captured by the greed of white men. Nor should we find puzzling her depiction of Africa as “Pagan” versus somewhere “refined.” Even her bizarre interpretation of slavery’s theft of Black life as a merciful rescue should not bewilder anyone. These are regular kinds of iniquitous nonsense found in white literature, the literature that Phillis Wheatley assimilated, with no choice in the matter.

But here, in this surprising poem, this first Black poet presents us with something wholly her own, something entirely new: It is her matter-of-fact assertion that “once I redemption neither sought nor knew,” as in: Once I existed beyond and without these terms under consideration. *Once I existed on other than your terms*. And, she says, *but* since we are talking with your talk about good and evil/redemption and damnation, let me tell you something you had better understand. I am Black as Cain *and* I may very well be an angel of the Lord: Take care

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not to offend the Lord!

Where did that thought come to Phillis Wheatley?

Was it a nice day?

Does it matter?

Following her “intrinsic ardor,” and attuned to the core of her own person, this girl, the first Black poet in America, had dared to redefine herself from house slave to, possibly, an angel of the Almighty.

And she was making herself at home.

And, depending on whether you estimated that nearly naked Black girl on the auction block to be seven or eight years old, in 1761, by the time she was eighteen or nineteen, she had published her first book of poetry, *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral*. It was published in London, in 1773, and the American edition appeared, years later, in 1786. Here are some examples from the poems of Phillis Wheatley:

from “On the Death of Rev. Dr. Sewell”:

Come let us all behold with wishful eyes
The saint ascending to his native skies.

from “On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield”:

Take him, ye Africans, he longs for you,
Impartial Savior is his title due,
Washed in the fountain of redeeming blood
You shall be sons and kings, and priest to God.

Here is an especially graceful and musical couplet:

But, see the softly stealing tears apace,
Pursue each other down the mourner’s face;

This is an especially awful, virtually absurd set of lines by Ms. Wheatley:

Go, Thebons! great nations will obey,
And pious tribute to her altars pay:
With rights divine, the goddess be implor’d,
Nor be her sacred offspring nor ador’d.
Thus Manto spoke. The Thebon maids obey,
And pious tribute to the goddess pay.

Awful, yes. Virtually absurd, well, yes, except, consider what it took

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for that young African to undertake such a persona, such values, and mythologies a million million miles remote from her own ancestry, and her own darkly formulating race! Consider what might meet her laborings, as a poet, should she, instead, invent a vernacular precise to Senegal, precise to slavery, and therefore, accurate to the secret wishings of her lost and secret heart?

If she, this genius teenager, should, instead of writing verse to comfort a white man upon the death of his wife, or a white woman upon the death of her husband, or verse commemorating weirdly fabled white characters bereft of children diabolically dispersed, if she, instead, composed a poetry to speak her pain, to say her grief, to find her parents, or to stir her people into insurrection, what would we now know about God's darling girl, that Phillis?

Who would publish that poetry, then?

But Phillis Miracle, she managed, nonetheless, to write, sometimes, towards the personal truth of her experience.

For example, we find in a monumental poem entitled "Thoughts on the Works of Providence," these five provocative lines, confirming every suspicion that most of the published Phillis Wheatley represents a meager portion of her concerns and inclinations:

As reason's pow'rs by day our God disclose,
So we may trace him in the night's repose.
Say what is sleep? and dreams how passing strange!
When action ceases, and ideas range
Licentious and unbounded o'er the plains.

And, concluding this long work, there are these lines:

Infinite *love* whene'er we turn our eyes
Appears: this ev'ry creature's wants supplies,
This most is heard in Nature's constant voice,
This makes the morn, and this the eve rejoice,
This bids the fost'ring rains and dews descend
To nourish all, to serve on gen'ral end,
The good of man: Yet man ungrateful pays
But little homage, and but little praise.

Now and again and again these surviving works of the genius Phillis Wheatley veer, incisive and unmistakable, completely away from the verse of good girl Phillis ever compassionate upon the death of someone else's beloved, pious Phillis modestly enraptured by the glorious trials of virtue on the road to Christ, arcane Phillis intent upon an "Ode to Neptune," or patriotic Phillis penning an encomium to General

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George Washington (“Thee, first in peace and honor”). Then do we find that “Ethiop” as she once called herself, that “Africa’s muse,” knowledgeable, but succinct, on “dreams how passing strange! When action ceases, ideas range/licentious and unbounded o’er the plains.”

Phillis Licentious Wheatley?

Phillis Miracle Wheatley in contemplation of love and want of love?

Was it a nice day?

It was not natural. And she was the first.

Repeatedly singing for liberty, singing against the tyrannical, repeatedly avid in her trusting support of the American Revolution (how could men want freedom enough to die for it but then want slavery enough to die for that), repeatedly lifting witness to the righteous and the kindly factors of her days, she was no ordinary teenage poet, male or female, Black or white. Indeed, the insistently concrete content of her tribute to the revolutionaries who would forge America, an independent nation state, indeed the specific daily substance of her poetry establishes Phillis Wheatley as the first decidedly American poet on this continent, Black or white, male or female.

Nor did she only love the ones who purchased her, a slave, those ones who loved her, yes, but with astonishment. Her lifelong friend was a young Black woman, Obour Tanner, who lived in Newport, Rhode Island, and one of her few poems dedicated to a living person, but neither morbid nor ethereal, was written to the young Black visual artist, Sapio Moorhead, himself a slave. It is he who crafted the portrait of Phillis that serves as her frontispiece profile in her book of poems. Here are the opening lines from her poem, “To S. M., A Young African Painter, On Seeing His Works”:

To show the lab’ring bosom’s deep intent,
And thought in living characters to paint.
When first thy pencil did those beauties give,
And breathing figures learnt from thee to live,
How did those prospects give my soul delight,
A new creation rushing on my sight?
Still, wondrous youth! each noble path pursue,
On deathless glories fix thine ardent view:
Still may the painter’s and the poet’s fire
To aid thy pencil, and thy verse conspire!
And many the charms of each seraphic theme
Conduct thy footsteps to immortal fame!

Remember that the poet so generously addressing the “wondrous youth” is certainly no older than eighteen, herself! And this, years before

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the American Revolution, and how many many years before the 1960's! This is the first Black poet of America addressing her Brother Artist not as so-and-so's Boy, but as "Sapio Moorhead, A Young African Painter."

Where did Phillis Miracle acquire this consciousness?

Was it a nice day?

It was not natural. And she was the first.

But did she, we may persevere, critical from the ease of the 1980's, did she love, did she Need, freedom?

In a poem typically titled at such length and in such deferential rectitude as to discourage most readers from scanning the poem that follows, in the poem titled, "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for North America, etc.", Phillis Miracle has written these irresistible, authentic, felt lines:

No more America in mounful strain
Of wrongs, and grievance unredress'd complain,
No longer shalt Thou dread the iron chain,
Which wanton tyranny with lawless head
Had made, and with it meant t' enslave the land
Should you, my Lord, while you peruse my song,
Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,
Whence flow these wishes for the common food,
By feeling hearts alone best understood,
I, young in life, by seeming cruel of fate
Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat.
What pangs excruciating most molest
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd
That from a father seized his babe below'd
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?

So did the darling girl of God compose her thoughts, prior to 1772.
And then.

And then her poetry, these poems, were published in London.

And then, during her twenty-first year, Suzannah Wheatley, the white woman slaveholder who had been changed into the white mother, the white mentor, the white protectorate of Phillis, died.

Without that white indulgence, that white love, without that white sponsorship, what happened to the young African daughter, the young African poet?

No one knows for sure.

With the death of Mrs. Wheatley, Phillis came of age, a Black slave in

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America.

Where did she live?

How did she eat?

No one knows for sure.

But four years later she met and married a Black man, John Peters. Mr. Peters apparently thought well of himself, and of his people. He comported himself with dignity, studied law, argued for the liberation of Black people, and earned the everyday dislike of whitefolks. His wife bore him three children; all of them died.

His wife continued to be Phillis Miracle.

His wife continued to obey the “intrinsic ardor” of her calling and she never ceased the practise of her poetry.

She hoped, in fact, to publish a second volume of her verse.

This would be the poetry of Phillis the lover of John, Phillis the woman, Phillis the wife of a Black man pragmatically premature in his defiant self-respect, Phillis giving birth to three children, Phillis the mother, who must bury the three children she delivered into American life.

None of these poems was ever published.

This would have been the poetry of someone who has chosen herself, free, and brave to be free in a land of slavery.

When she was thirty-one years old, in 1784, Phillis Wheatley, the first Black poet in America, she died.

Her husband, John Peters, advertised and begged that the manuscript of her poems she had given to someone, please be returned.

But no one returned them.

And I believe we would not have seen them, anyway. I believe no one would have published the poetry of Black Phillis Wheatley, that grown woman who stayed with her chosen Black man. I believe that the death of Suzannah Wheatley, coincident with the African poet's twenty-first birthday, signalled, decisively, the end of her status as a child, as a dependent. From there we would hear from an independent Black woman poet in America.

Can you imagine that, in 1775?

Can you imagine that, today?

America has long been tolerant of Black children, compared to its reception of independent Black men and Black women.

She died in 1784.

Was it a nice day?

It was not natural. And she was the first.

Last week, as the final judge for this year's Loft McKnight Awards in creative writing, Awards distributed in Minneapolis, Minnesota, I read

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through sixteen manuscripts of rather fine poetry.

These are the terms, the lexical items, that I encountered there:

Rock, moon, star, roses, chimney, Prague, elms,
lilac, railroad tracks, lake, lilies, snow geese,
crow, mountain, arrow feathers, ear of corn, marsh
sandstone, rabbitbush, gulley, pumpkins, eagle,
tundra, dwarf willow dipper-bird, brown creek,
lizards, sycamores, glacier, canteen, skate eggs,
birch, spruce, pumphandle

Is there anything about that listing odd? I didn't suppose so. These are the terms, the lexical items accurate to the specific white Minnesota daily life of those white poets.

And so I did not reject these poems, I did not despise them saying, "How is this possible: Sixteen different manuscripts of poetry written in 1985 and not one of them uses the terms of my own Black life! Not one of them writes about the police murder of Eleanor Bumpurs or the Bernard Goetz shooting of four Black boys or apartheid in South Africa, or unemployment, or famine in Ethiopia, or rape, or fire escapes, or cruise missiles in the New York harbor, or medicare, or alleyways, or napalm, or \$4 an hour, and no time off for lunch.

I did not and I would not presume to impose my urgencies upon white poets writing in America. But the miracle of Black poetry in America, the *difficult* miracle of Black poetry in America, is that we have been rejected and we are frequently dismissed as "political" or "topical" or "sloganeering" and "crude" and "insignificant" because, like Phillis Wheatley, we have persisted for freedom. We will write against South Africa and we will seldom pen a poem about wild geese flying over Prague, or grizzlies at the rain barrel under the dwarf willow trees. We will write, published or not, however we may, like Phillis Wheatley, of the terror and the hungering and the quandries of our African lives on this North American soil. And as long as we study white literature, as long as we assimilate the English language and its implicit, English values, as long as we allude and defer to gods we "neither sought nor knew," as long as we, Black poets in America, remain the children of slavery, as long as we do not come of age and attempt, then, to speak the truth of our difficult maturity in an alien place, then we will be beloved, and sheltered, and published, and praised.

But not otherwise. And yet we persist.

And it was not natural. And she was the first.

This is the difficult miracle of Black poetry in America: that we persist, published or not, and loved or unloved: we persist.

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And this is: "Something like A Sonnet for Phillis Miracle Wheatley":

Girl from the realm of birds florid and fleet
flying full feather in far or near weather
Who fell to a dollar lust cuffed like meat
Captured by avarice and hate spit together
Trembling asthmatic alone on the slave bloc
built by a savagery travelling by carriage
Viewed like a species of flaw in the livestock
A child without safety of mother or marriage

Chosen by whimsy but born to surprise
They taught you to read but you learned how to write
Begging the universe into your eyes:
They dressed you in light but you dreamed
with the night.

From Africa singing of justice and grace,
Your early verse sweetens the fame of our Race,

And because we Black people in North America persist in an irony profound, Black poetry persists in this way:

Like the trees of winter and
like the snow which has no power
makes very little sound
but comes and collects itself
edible light on the black trees
The tall black trees of winter
lifting up a poetry of snow
so that we may be astounded
by the poems of black
trees inside a cold environment.

BECOMING A LITERARY PERSON OUT OF CONTEXT

Helen Barolini

THE PLACE NAMES in my personal lexicon—where I was born, where my forebears came from, and where I have lived—have a classical ring: Syracuse, Croton, Utica, Magna Graecia, Rome, Aurora. They are in America, and they are in Italy; some are in both places—as I have been. For in the sequence of transatlantic crossings that my life became, I went from here to there, and back again, circling an elusive identity that,