The Age of Phillis

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Middletown, Connecticut
for Phillis Wheatley Peters
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Prologue: Mother/Muse

This is a song for the genius child.
Sing it softly, for the song is wild.
— Langston Hughes, from “Genius Child”
Mercy, girl.
What the mother might have said, pointing
at the sun rising, what makes life possible.
Then, dripped the bowl of water,
reverent, into oblivious earth.
Was this prayer for her?

Respect for the dead or disappeared?
An act to please a genius child?

Her daughter would speak
of water, bowl, sun—
light arriving,
light gone—
sometime after the nice white lady
paid and named her for the slave ship.

Mercy: what the child called Phillis
would claim after that sea journey.

Journey.
Let’s call it that.

Let’s lie to each other.

Not early descent into madness.
Naked travail among filth and rats.
What got Phillis over that sea?  
What kept a stolen daughter?  

Perhaps it was mercy,  
Dear Reader.  

*Mercy,*  
Dear Brethren.  

Water, bowl, sun—  
a mothering, God’s milky sound.  

Morning shards, and a mother wondered  
if her daughter forgot her real name,  

refused to envision the rest:  
baby teeth missing  
and somebody wrapping her treasure  
(barely) in a dirty carpet.  

’Twas mercy.  
You know the story—  

how we’ve lied to each other.
And pleasing Gambia on my soul returns,
With native grace in Spring’s luxuriant reign,
Smiles the gay mead and Eden blooms again,
The various bower, the tuneful flowing stream,
The soft retreats, the lovers golden dream . . .
— Phillis Wheatley, from “PHILIS’s Reply to the Answer in our Last by the Gentleman in the Navy”

What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
— Countee Cullen, from “Heritage”
Utilitarian—
then, at some point, an embrace of beauty.
A glow: the man waits, a picture in his head.
He will claw out the dream’s tincture, pour it into mold— and in that dream, he has met the hyena laughing about chains. The man will pound metal to forget that grievous sound.
He will master what was brought from earth, from viscera’s need— until his hands seize, he will do this work, and his son will do the same, and it will be written upon the griot’s skull.
after
the after-birth
is delivered
the mother stops
holding her breath
the mid-wife gives
what came before
her just-washed pain
her insanity pain
an undeserved pain
a God-given pain
ob ob ob pain
drum-talking pain
witnessing pain
Allah
a mother offers
You this gift
prays You find
it acceptable
her living pain
her creature pain
her pretty-little-baby
pain
After the required time,
the seclusion to fool scream-faced
souls: the naming ceremony.
People arrive with gifts
for the close-eyed baby with no sense,
separate into men and women.
They do not count their children
like bad-lucked livestock—
they eat. They talk.
Chew kola.
Pray at the required
times. Then: eat.
Still: eat.
The baby unaware of her meaning.
In years, her father’s expectation:
her body hailing a good
bride price, that she might
sing forth sons—
if she prays as well.
At any rate, boys clearly hear
the loudest greeting.
Births to be cherished.
Tribal hierarchy.
God. (Him only or grouped,
translated stars.)
A man. His wife.
(Maybe: two more.)
A girl sits right at the bottom—
and yet,
er her father carries her high.
With this bone-gourd,
he has become
someone.
When mother and child
walk from the village
to gather fruit, faces
recite quotidian love.

Do you have peace
(Waw, waw, diam rek)

Then, they are alone, and the toddler
points out the fat-bottomed
baobab, the mango
with its frustrating reach.
Mother pierces a low-hanging
jewel, and her small
shadow trills gratitude.

Yaay, you are so nice
(Waw, waw)

Yaay, I love you so
(Waw, waw)

No demonstration, but a hand
touching the tender head
that was braided over cries.
Later that night,
the father must listen, too.

Baay, I ate a mango
(Waw, waw)

Baay, I saw a bug
(Waw, waw)

The child sits closer
to his mat,
whispers ambiguous lights:

I know all the things—

and he does not answer,
but smiles at his wife:
their daughter is a marvel
and they must pray for humility.
The water was preparation.
When the mother
and her child rose
in the morning, no Jesus.
The same God, yet
with ninety-nine monikers.

*We have awoken
and all of creation
has awoken, for Allah,
Lord of all the worlds*

The bowl—
wooden or gourd—
was light, as water
and faith are heavy.
In the century after
this mother and child
are dead, someone
will write about
these mornings,
that the mother
poured a ritual
for her daughter
to remember.
This writing someone
won’t know of ablutions,
of giving peace,
of purity required
before submission,
that God’s servants
had ached
all night to be clean.
BEFORE THE TAKING OF GOONAY

Someplace in the Gambia, c. 1759

_Mystery_ is the word for my purposes here. This child frail, not quite whole. Not the leader of the gang. The strange understanding
to be revealed. Is she dancing with the others? Is there a shaking of tail feathers, a nonsense ditty? _Shimmy to the west Shimmy to the east_

_Shake it Shake it Yeah Yeah Yeah_

A sharing of secrets with a lagging friend? I’m full of questions. I can ask History what I want.

I can forget the rest. Why will the slave raiders snatch a thin, sickly girl? Why not leave her behind for the usual spoils? The men with clubs.

The charcoaled village. The old ones. The babies— I can say, _No. We won’t speak about all that._ I can keep returning to this blank

someplace before her taking. The story of the red cloth not yet laid out. _A genius child_ playing, brightness in a mother’s crown.

A pearl if she lives by the sea. The strand of a gathered plait. Needed point: surely, love doesn’t rest in emptied air without some disappointment,

but this is a good moment. Isn’t it?—I can run to my own playground, remember a cupped palm next to my ear. I can call my mother who is yet alive.

I can claim my memories. She can answer her ringing telephone. I won’t forget her name or mine.
The men arrive. Slave ships are anchored.
The men arrive. The traders gather.
The men arrive. The traders march.
The men arrive. The war is waged.
The men arrive. The fire comes.
The men arrive. The people run.
The men arrive. The chase begins.
The men arrive. The dead abandoned.
The men arrive. The iron sounds.
The men arrive. The people march.
The men arrive. The sea. The sea.
The men arrive. The traders haggle.
The men arrive. The silver laughs.
The men arrive. The castle groans.
The men arrive. The door opens.
The men arrive. The water welcomes.
The men arrive. The mourning longs.
The men arrive. Our names shall scatter.
I have touched my belly
in expectancy, strummed
meat-covered ribs.
The navel's planetary cavern.
The thump behind my ear,
talking of cleared ashes.
Where is my wife?
Where is my daughter?
I beat my shameful forehead.
I wanted a boy, hard
foot walking me forward.
A boy, then, a man,
I thought I preferred—
and here I am, gripping
the phantom skirts
of women.
Where is my wife?
Where is my daughter?
PHILLIS was brought from Africa to America small creature spinning in the Year 1761 my hands reaching between Seven and Eight still my child Years of Age Without any Assistance mine from School Education and don’t forget me by only what she was taught in the Family or this piece of land my sweet girl attained the English oh come back language to which she don’t leave was an utter Stranger before to the great Astonishment of all who heard her touch my hands This Relation is given walk to my side by her Master who bought her JOHN WHEATLEY my rare seed Yaay is calling Boston come to me