

Praise Song for the Day

Elizabeth Alexander

A Poem for Barack Obama's 2009 Presidential Inauguration

Each day we go about our business,
walking past each other, catching each other's
eyes or not, about to speak or speaking.

All about us is noise. All about us is
noise and bramble, thorn and din, each
one of our ancestors on our tongues.

Someone is stitching up a hem, darning
a hole in a uniform, patching a tire,
repairing the things in need of repair.

Someone is trying to make music somewhere,
with a pair of wooden spoons on an oil drum,
with cello, boom box, harmonica, voice.

A woman and her son wait for the bus.
A farmer considers the changing sky.
A teacher says, Take out your pencils. Begin.

We encounter each other in words, words
spiny or smooth, whispered or declaimed,
words to consider, reconsider.

We cross dirt roads and highways that mark
the will of some one and then others, who said
I need to see what's on the other side.

I know there's something better down the road.
We need to find a place where we are safe.
We walk into that which we cannot yet see.

Say it plain: that many have died for this day.
Sing the names of the dead who brought us here,
who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges,

picked the cotton and the lettuce, built
brick by brick the glittering edifices
they would then keep clean and work inside of.

Praise song for struggle, praise song for the day.
Praise song for every hand-lettered sign,
the figuring-it-out at kitchen tables.

Some live by love thy neighbor as thyself,
others by first do no harm or take no more
than you need. What if the mightiest word is love?

Love beyond marital, filial, national,
love that casts a widening pool of light,
love with no need to pre-empt grievance.

In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air,
any thing can be made, any sentence begun.
On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,

praise song for walking forward in that light.

Love is creative and redemptive

Martin Luther King, Jr., 1957

Love is creative and redemptive.

Love builds up and unites; hate tears down and destroys.

The aftermath of the 'fight with fire' method which you suggest is bitterness and chaos, the aftermath of the love method is reconciliation and creation of the beloved community.

Physical force can repress, restrain, coerce, destroy, but it cannot create and organize anything permanent; only love can do that. Yes, love—which means understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill, even for one's enemies—is the solution to the race problem.

Sing About Love

I don't want to sing about anger and hate
I don't want to sing about fear and defeat
I don't want to sing about the things I always sing about
I wish I could sing about love

I don't want to sing about war and greed
I don't want to sing about those we can't feed
I don't want to sing about the things I always sing about
I wish I could sing about love

I don't want to sing about suffering and pain
I don't want to sing for another campaign
I don't want to sing about the things I always sing about
I wish I could sing about love

I don't want to sing about rights and wrongs
I don't want to sing all the same old songs
But I'll sing them, and sing them, 'til there's no need to sing them
And then I can sing about love.

Ain't I a Woman?

Sojourner Truth (1797-1883)

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter.

I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place!

And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? [member of audience whispers, "intellect"]

That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them. Obligated to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain't got nothing more to say.

Still I Rise

Rosephanye Powell

Though I have been wounded, aching heart full of pain. Still I rise, yes, still I rise.
Jus' like a budding rose, my bloom is nourished by rain.
Haven't time to wonder why, though fearful I strive.
My pray'r and faith uphold me 'til my courage arrives.

Still I rise as an eagle, soaring above ev'ry fear.
With each day I succeed, I grow strong an' believe
That it's all within my reach; I'm reaching for the skies,
Bolstered by courage, yes, still I rise.
Yes, it's all within my reach; I'm reaching for the skies, Yes, still I rise.

Gentle as a woman; tender sweet are my sighs. Still I rise, yes, still I rise.
Strength is in my tears and healing rains in my cries.
Plunging depths of anguish, I determine to strive.
My pray'r and faith uphold me 'til my courage arrives.

Though you see me slump with heartache; Heart so heavy that it breaks.
Be not deceived I fly on bird's wings, rising sun, its healing rays.
Look at me, you see a woman; Gentle as a butterfly.
But don't you think, not for one moment, that I'm not strong because I cry.

America

Claude McKay (1889-1948)

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
Giving me strength erect against her hate.
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.
Yet as a rebel fronts a king in state,
I stand within her walls with not a shred
Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.
Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,
And see her might and granite wonders there,
Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.

Sacred Concert

Duke Ellington

Praise God with the sound of the trumpet;
Praise God with the psaltery and harp;
Praise god with the sound of the tumbrel and dance.
Praise God with the sound of the stringed instruments:
the organ, cymbals, the loud, high-sounding cymbals,
Let everything that has breath praise god
Praise the Lord and dance.

Heaven, my dream; heaven, divine, heaven supreme,
Heaven combines every sweet and pretty thing life would bring.
Heavenly heaven to be is just the ultimate degree to be.

The wonder of God;
The splendor O God;
The heaven of heavens.
The domain of god is universal, beyond end.

Lord, dear Lord above, God Almighty, God of Love,
Oh please look down and see my people through.
I believe that God put sun and moon up in the sky.
I don't mind the grey skies 'cause they're just clouds passing by.

David up and dance, David dance before the Lord.
He dance before the Lord with all his might.
Psalteries, tumbrels, harps and cymbals rang out loud and clar.
Shouting, singing, trumpets bringing love to every ear.

Almighty god has those angels way up there above,
Up there a-weaving sparking fabrics just for you and me to love.
Almighty God the proper place waiting to receive,
to welcome us and remake us in grace.
Wash you face and hands and heart and soul (cause you wash so well)
God will keep you safely where there's no sulphur smell,
Almighty God can be waiting to dress, caress, and bless us all in perpetuity.

Jazz Fan Looks Back

Jayne Cortez

I crisscrossed with Monk
Wailed with Bud
Counted every star with Stitt
Sang "Don't Blame Me" with Sarah
Wore a flower like Billie
Screamed in the range of Dinah
& scatted "How High the Moon" with Ella Fitzgerald
as she blew roof off the Shrine Auditorium
Jazz at the Philharmonic
I cut my hair into a permanent tam
Made my feet rebellious metronomes
Embedded record needles in paint on paper
Talked bopology talk
Laughed in high-pitched saxophone phrases
Became keeper of every Bird riff
every Lester lick
as Hawk melodicized my ear of infatuated tongues
& Blakey drummed militant messages in
soul of my applauding teeth
& Ray hit bass notes to the last love seat in my bones
I moved in triple time with Max
Grooved high with Diz
Perdidoed with Pettiford
Flew home with Hamp
Shuffled in Dexter's Deck
Squatty-rooed with Peterson
Dreamed a "52nd Street Theme" with Fats
& scatted "Lady Be Good" with Ella Fitzgerald
as she blew roof off the Shrine Auditorium
Jazz at the Philharmonic

Lift every voice and sing

John Rosamond Johnson

Lift every voice and sing, till earth and Heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise, high as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat, have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered;
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered;
Out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,
Thou Who hast brought us thus far on the way;
Thou Who hast by Thy might, led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.

Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee.
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee.
Shadowed beneath Thy hand, may we forever stand,
True to our God, true to our native land.