

**Classic Poetry Series**

# **Evie Shockley**

**- poems -**

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## **Evie Shockley**

Born and raised in Nashville, Tennessee, Evie Shockley received her BA from Northwestern University. After studying Law at the University of Michigan, she earned her PhD in African Literature from Duke University.

Shockley's first book, *The Gorgon Goddess*, was published by Carolina Wren Press in 2001. Since then she has published three books: *a half-red sea* (Carolina Wren Press, 2006), *31 words \* prose poems* (Belladonna\* Books, 2007), and *the new black* (Wesleyan University Press, 2011).

Embracing both free verse and formal structures, Shockley straddles the divide between traditional and experimental poetics. A review of her work in *Library Journal* noted that, "Shockley's work incorporates elements of myth without being patently 'mythical' and is personal without being self-indulgent, sentimental without being saccharine." Her reported influences include Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton, and Harryette Mullen.

A Cave Canem graduate fellow, Shockley was also awarded a residency at the Hedgebrook Retreat for Women Writers in 2003. Two of her poems were displayed in the Biko 30/30 exhibit, a commemoration of the life and work of anti-apartheid activist Steven Biko, which toured South Africa in 2007.

Shockley was co-editor of the poetry journal *jubilat* from 2004-2007, and teaches African American Literature and Creative Writing at Rutgers University-New Brunswick.

## Ballplayer

i cop a squat on a squared-off log,  
to watch you ball on the community center court.  
butt numb, i shift my weight

and shake mosquitos from my ankles,  
but never take my eyes off the game.  
yours follow the orange orb, your pupils  
twin, brown moons reflecting its light.

your play is wild efficiency,  
you are a four-pronged magic wand,  
waving, as if agentless, in all directions at once.  
an opponent dribbles the ball - now he sees it,

now he don't, it's gone, flown,  
and you've given it its wings.  
you are one-eighth of the shrieking rubber,

one-eighth of the growls and calls. you are  
the delicious assist, the unerring pass.  
you spread your skills out before me, a peacock  
among pigeons, as if to say "all eyes on me,"

and make it worth my while.  
a chill trails the sun west like a long, clammy train,  
crawls over me and my makeshift bench,  
over the emptying playground,

but stops at the edge of the concrete,  
where eight men burning keep it at bay,  
the way torches smoking around a patio

ward off insects. twilight rises like dark steam  
from the dewy grass, but you don't see it.  
the ball still lights the court  
until the winning jumper sinks and puts it out.

then earth returns to view, and you jog over  
to slap my palm and beam,  
and receive the grin i give you like a trophy.

Evie Shockley

## Where is it Clean

when your mother can rise from her place  
on the pew during the early service,  
early enough that the sun barely fills the sky  
with its weak straw, but row after row  
in the auditorium is flush with folks who want  
to be home before the football game gets underway  
or hate the slower pace the later service takes  
but still got to get their god on  
before starting a new week: when she can rise  
and tip down the aisle, three-inch heels  
pointing a warning at hell through the plush  
mauve carpet, smile and nod at preacher,  
who is sitting on the pulpit's little throne  
with his bible beneath his palm, a man thick-chested  
and stout-bellied with moral authority, whose face  
gleams with crushing benevolent power:  
when she can give him a pleasant nod,  
and circle around behind the microphone standing  
like a thin silver trophy between the heavenly  
floral arrangements, give a firm tug  
to the hem of her suit jacket, and lean over  
the dimpled nob, the ribbons encircling the crown  
of her broad-brimmed hat quivering with each  
breath, the crisp white paper in her hands  
held out at arm's length from her customary squint,  
her eyes scooting back and forth,  
between this document and the village of worshipers  
fanning themselves and waiting on her voice:  
when she can stand there and coo, good morning,  
praise the lord and introduce her reading  
as a poem by my daughter, a quick look  
at your beaming father, then take your words  
between her lightly pinked lips and raise each one  
to the light, before god and these witnesses,  
enunciating like she learned to recite from the fourth-

grade primer in her schoolhouse's single room,  
sending sound through the vowels  
like a bell: when she can do this, can rise and walk,  
and smile and read and have the church say amen -  
then you can safely declare: it is clean.

Evie Shockley