

**Classic Poetry Series**

# **Robert Hayden**

**- poems -**

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## **El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X)**

O masks and metamorphoses of Ahab, Native Son

I

The icy evil that struck his father down  
and ravished his mother into madness  
trapped him in violence of a punished self  
struggling to break free.

As Home Boy, as Dee-troit Red,  
he fled his name, became the quarry of  
his own obsessed pursuit.

He conked his hair and Lindy-hopped,  
zoot-suited jiver, swinging those chicks  
in the hot rose and reefer glow.

His injured childhood bullied him.  
He skirmished in the Upas trees  
and cannibal flowers of the American Dream--

but could not hurt the enemy  
powered against him there.

Robert Hayden

## Frederick Douglass

When it is finally ours, this freedom, this liberty, this beautiful  
and terrible thing, needful to man as air,  
usable as earth; when it belongs at last to all,  
when it is truly instinct, brain matter, diastole, systole,  
reflex action; when it is finally won; when it is more  
than the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians:  
this man, this Douglass, this former slave, this Negro  
beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning a world  
where none is lonely, none hunted, alien,  
this man, superb in love and logic, this man  
shall be remembered. Oh, not with statues' rhetoric,  
not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze alone,  
but with the lives grown out of his life, the lives  
fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing.

Robert Hayden

## Full Moon

No longer throne of a goddess to whom we pray,  
no longer the bubble house of childhood's  
tumbling Mother Goose man,

The emphatic moon ascends--  
the brilliant challenger of rocket experts,  
the white hope of communications men.

Some I love who are dead  
were watchers of the moon and knew its lore;  
planted seeds, trimmed their hair,

Pierced their ears for gold hoop earrings  
as it waxed or waned.  
It shines tonight upon their graves.

And burned in the garden of Gethsemane,  
its light made holy by the dazzling tears  
with which it mingled.

And spread its radiance on the exile's path  
of Him who was The Glorious One,  
its light made holy by His holiness.

Already a mooted goal and tomorrow perhaps  
an arms base, a livid sector,  
the full moon dominates the dark.

Robert Hayden

## Middle Passage

I

Jesús, Estrella, Esperanza, Mercy:

Sails flashing to the wind like weapons,  
sharks following the moans the fever and the dying;  
horror the corposant and compass rose.

Middle Passage:  
voyage through death  
to life upon these shores.

"10 April 1800--  
Blacks rebellious. Crew uneasy. Our linguist says  
their moaning is a prayer for death,  
our and their own. Some try to starve themselves.  
Lost three this morning leaped with crazy laughter  
to the waiting sharks, sang as they went under."

Desire, Adventure, Tartar, Ann:

Standing to America, bringing home  
black gold, black ivory, black seed.

Deep in the festering hold thy father lies, of his bones  
New England pews are made, those are altar lights that were his eyes.

Jesus Saviour Pilot Me  
Over Life's Tempestuous Sea

We pray that Thou wilt grant, O Lord,  
safe passage to our vessels bringing  
heathen souls unto Thy chastening.

Jesus Saviour

"8 bells. I cannot sleep, for I am sick  
with fear, but writing eases fear a little  
since still my eyes can see these words take shape  
upon the page & so I write, as one  
would turn to exorcism. 4 days scudding,  
but now the sea is calm again. Misfortune  
follows in our wake like sharks (our grinning  
tutelary gods). Which one of us  
has killed an albatross? A plague among  
our blacks--Ophthalmia: blindness--& we  
have jettisoned the blind to no avail.  
It spreads, the terrifying sickness spreads.  
Its claws have scratched sight from the Capt.'s eyes  
& there is blindness in the fo'c'sle  
& we must sail 3 weeks before we come

to port."

What port awaits us, Davy Jones' or home? I've  
heard of slavers drifting, drifting, playthings of wind and storm and  
chance, their crews gone blind, the jungle hatred crawling  
up on deck.

Thou Who Walked On Galilee

"Deponent further sayeth The Bella J  
left the Guinea Coast  
with cargo of five hundred blacks and odd  
for the barracoons of Florida:

"That there was hardly room 'tween-decks for half  
the sweltering cattle stowed spoon-fashion there;  
that some went mad of thirst and tore their flesh  
and sucked the blood:

"That Crew and Captain lusted with the comeliest  
of the savage girls kept naked in the cabins;  
that there was one they called The Guinea Rose  
and they cast lots and fought to lie with her:

"That when the Bo's'n piped all hands, the flames  
spreading from starboard already were beyond  
control, the negroes howling and their chains  
entangled with the flames:

"That the burning blacks could not be reached,  
that the Crew abandoned ship,  
leaving their shrieking negresses behind,  
that the Captain perished drunken with the wenches:

"Further Deponent sayeth not."

Pilot Oh Pilot Me

II

Aye, lad, and I have seen those factories,  
Gambia, Rio Pongo, Calabar;  
have watched the artful mongos baiting traps  
of war wherein the victor and the vanquished

Were caught as prizes for our barracoons.  
Have seen the nigger kings whose vanity  
and greed turned wild black hides of Fellatah,  
Mandingo, Ibo, Kru to gold for us.

And there was one--King Anthracite we named him--

fetish face beneath French parasols  
of brass and orange velvet, impudent mouth  
whose cups were carven skulls of enemies:

He'd honor us with drum and feast and conjo  
and palm-oil-glistening wenches deft in love,  
and for tin crowns that shone with paste,  
red calico and German-silver trinkets

Would have the drums talk war and send  
his warriors to burn the sleeping villages  
and kill the sick and old and lead the young  
in coffles to our factories.

Twenty years a trader, twenty years,  
for there was wealth aplenty to be harvested  
from those black fields, and I'd be trading still  
but for the fevers melting down my bones.

### III

Shuttles in the rocking loom of history,  
the dark ships move, the dark ships move,  
their bright ironical names  
like jests of kindness on a murderer's mouth;  
plough through thrashing glister toward  
fata morgana's lucent melting shore,  
weave toward New World littorals that are  
mirage and myth and actual shore.

Voyage through death,  
voyage whose chartings are unlove.

A charnel stench, effluvium of living death  
spreads outward from the hold,  
where the living and the dead, the horribly dying,  
lie interlocked, lie foul with blood and excrement.

Deep in the festering hold thy father lies, the corpse of mercy  
rots with him, rats eat love's rotten gelid eyes. But, oh, the  
living look at you with human eyes whose suffering accuses you, whose  
hatred reaches through the swill of dark to strike you like a leper's  
claw. You cannot stare that hatred down or chain the fear that stalks  
the watches and breathes on you its fetid scorching breath; cannot  
kill the deep immortal human wish, the timeless will.

"But for the storm that flung up barriers  
of wind and wave, The Amistad, señores,  
would have reached the port of Príncipe in two,  
three days at most; but for the storm we should  
have been prepared for what befell.

Swift as a puma's leap it came. There was  
that interval of moonless calm filled only  
with the water's and the rigging's usual sounds,  
then sudden movement, blows and snarling cries  
and they had fallen on us with machete  
and marlinspike. It was as though the very  
air, the night itself were striking us.  
Exhausted by the rigors of the storm,  
we were no match for them. Our men went down  
before the murderous Africans. Our loyal  
Celestino ran from below with gun  
and lantern and I saw, before the cane-  
knife's wounding flash, Cinquez,  
that surly brute who calls himself a prince,  
directing, urging on the ghastly work.  
He hacked the poor mulatto down, and then  
he turned on me. The decks were slippery  
when daylight finally came. It sickens me  
to think of what I saw, of how these apes  
threw overboard the butchered bodies of  
our men, true Christians all, like so much jetsam.  
Enough, enough. The rest is quickly told:  
Cinquez was forced to spare the two of us  
you see to steer the ship to Africa,  
and we like phantoms doomed to rove the sea  
voyaged east by day and west by night,  
deceiving them, hoping for rescue,  
prisoners on our own vessel, till  
at length we drifted to the shores of this  
your land, America, where we were freed  
from our unspeakable misery. Now we  
demand, good sirs, the extradition of  
Cinquez and his accomplices to La  
Havana. And it distresses us to know  
there are so many here who seem inclined  
to justify the mutiny of these blacks.  
We find it paradoxical indeed  
that you whose wealth, whose tree of liberty  
are rooted in the labor of your slaves  
should suffer the august John Quincey Adams  
to speak with so much passion of the right  
of chattel slaves to kill their lawful masters  
and with his Roman rhetoric weave a hero's  
garland for Cinquez. I tell you that  
we are determined to return to Cuba  
with our slaves and there see justice done.  
Cinquez--  
or let us say 'the Prince'--Cinquez shall die."

The deep immortal human wish,  
the timeless will:

Cinquez its deathless primaveral image,  
life that transfigures many lives.

Voyage through death  
to life upon these shores.

Robert Hayden

## **Monet's Waterlilies**

Today as the news from Selma and Saigon  
poisons the air like fallout,  
I come again to see  
the serene, great picture that I love.

Here space and time exist in light  
the eye like the eye of faith believes.  
The seen, the known  
dissolve in iridescence, become  
illusive flesh of light  
that was not, was, forever is.

O light beheld as through refracting tears.  
Here is the aura of that world  
each of us has lost.  
Here is the shadow of its joy.

Robert Hayden

## **O Daedalus, Fly Away Home**

For Maia and Julie)

Drifting night in the Georgia pines,  
coonskin drum and jubilee banjo.  
Pretty Malinda, dance with me.

Night is juba, night is congo.  
Pretty Malinda, dance with me.

Night is an African juju man  
weaving a wish and a weariness together  
to make two wings.

O fly away home fly away

Do you remember Africa?

O cleave the air fly away home

My gran, he flew back to Africa,  
just spread his arms and  
flew away home.

Drifting night in the windy pines;  
night is laughing, night is a longing.  
Pretty Malinda, come to me.

Night is a mourning juju man  
weaving a wish and a weariness together  
to make two wings.

O fly away home fly away

Robert Hayden

## **Perseus**

Her sleeping head with its great gelid mass  
    of serpents torpidly astir  
burned into the mirroring shield--  
    a scathing image dire  
as hated truth the mind accepts at last  
    and festers on.  
I struck. The shield flashed bare.

Yet even as I lifted up the head  
    and started from that place  
of gazing silences and terrored stone,  
    I thirsted to destroy.  
None could have passed me then--  
    no garland-bearing girl, no priest  
or staring boy--and lived.

Robert Hayden

## Runagate Runagate

Runs falls rises stumbles on from darkness into darkness  
and the darkness thicketed with shapes of terror  
and the hunters pursuing and the hounds pursuing  
and the night cold and the night long and the river  
to cross and the jack-muh-lanterns beckoning beckoning  
and blackness ahead and when shall I reach that somewhere  
morning and keep on going and never turn back and keep on going

Runagate  
Runagate  
Runagate

Many thousands rise and go  
many thousands crossing over  
O mythic North  
O star-shaped yonder Bible city

Some go weeping and some rejoicing  
some in coffins and some in carriages  
some in silks and some in shackles

Rise and go or fare you well

No more auction block for me  
no more driver's lash for me

If you see my Pompey, 30 yrs of age,  
new breeches, plain stockings, negro shoes;  
if you see my Anna, likely young mulatto  
branded E on the right cheek, R on the left,  
catch them if you can and notify subscriber.  
Catch them if you can, but it won't be easy.  
They'll dart underground when you try to catch them,  
plunge into quicksand, whirlpools, mazes,  
torn into scorpions when you try to catch them.

And before I'll be a slave  
I'll be buried in my grave

North star and bonanza gold  
I'm bound for the freedom, freedom-bound  
and oh Susyanna don't you cry for me

Runagate  
Runagate

II.  
Rises from their anguish and their power,

Harriet Tubman,

woman of earth, whipscarred,  
a summoning, a shining

Mean to be free

And this was the way of it, brethren brethren,  
way we journeyed from Can't to Can.  
Moon so bright and no place to hide,  
the cry up and the patterrollers riding,  
hound dogs belling in bladed air.  
And fear starts a-murbling, Never make it,  
we'll never make it. Hush that now,  
and she's turned upon us, levelled pistol  
glinting in the moonlight:  
Dead folks can't jaybird-talk, she says;  
you keep on going now or die, she says.

Wanted Harriet Tubman alias The General  
alias Moses Stealer of Slaves

In league with Garrison Alcott Emerson  
Garrett Douglass Thoreau John Brown  
Armed and known to be Dangerous

Wanted Reward Dead or Alive

Tell me, Ezekiel, oh tell me do you see  
mailed Jehovah coming to deliver me?

Hoot-owl calling in the ghosted air,  
five times calling to the hants in the air.  
Shadow of a face in the scary leaves,  
shadow of a voice in the talking leaves:

Come ride-a my train

Oh that train, ghost-story train  
through swamp and savanna movering movering,  
over trestles of dew, through caves of the wish,  
Midnight Special on a sabre track movering movering,  
first stop Mercy and the last Hallelujah.

Come ride-a my train

Mean mean mean to be free.

Robert Hayden

## Soledad

*(And I, I am no longer of that world)*

Naked, he lies in the blinded room  
chainsmoking, cradled by drugs, by jazz  
as never by any lover's cradling flesh.

Miles Davis coolly blows for him:  
O pena negra, sensual Flamenco blues;  
the red clay foxfire voice of Lady Day

(lady of the pure black magnolias)  
sobsings her sorrow and loss and fare you well,  
dryweeps the pain his treacherous jailers

have released him from for a while.  
His fears and his unfinished self  
await him down in the anywhere streets.

He hides on the dark side of the moon,  
takes refuge in a stained-glass cell,  
flies to a clockless country of crystal.

Only the ghost of Lady Day knows where  
he is. Only the music. And he swings  
oh swings: beyond complete immortal now.

Robert Hayden

## **The Prisoners**

Steel doors – guillotine gates –  
of the doorless house closed massively.  
We were locked in with loss.

Guards frisked us, marked our wrists,  
then let us into the drab Rec Hall –  
splotched green walls, high windows barred –

where the dispossessed awaited us.  
Hands intimate with knife and pistol,  
hands that had cruelly grasped and throttled

clasped ours in welcome. I sensed the plea  
of men denied: Believe us human  
like yourselves, who but for Grace ...

We shared relieving Hidden Words  
revealed by the Godlike imprisoned  
One, whose crime was truth.

And I read poems I hoped were true.  
It's like you been there, brother, been there,  
the scarred young lifer said.

Robert Hayden

## The Whipping

The old woman across the way  
is whipping the boy again  
and shouting to the neighborhood  
her goodness and his wrongs.

Wildly he crashes through elephant ears,  
pleads in dusty zinnias,  
while she in spite of crippling fat  
pursues and corners him.

She strikes and strikes the shrilly circling  
boy till the stick breaks  
in her hand. His tears are rainy weather  
to woundlike memories:

My head gripped in bony vise  
of knees, the writhing struggle  
to wrench free, the blows, the fear  
worse than blows that hateful

Words could bring, the face that I  
no longer knew or loved . . .  
Well, it is over now, it is over,  
and the boy sobs in his room,

And the woman leans muttering against  
a tree, exhausted, purged--  
avenged in part for lifelong hidings  
she has had to bear.

Robert Hayden

## Those Winter Sundays

Sundays too my father got up early  
And put his clothes on in the blueback cold,  
then with cracked hands that ached  
from labor in the weekday weather made  
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.  
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,  
and slowly I would rise and dress,  
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,  
who had driven out the cold  
and polished my good shoes as well.  
What did I know, what did I know  
of love's austere and lonely offices?

Robert Hayden