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Four Poems

Quatre poèmes

George Elliott Clarke

Elizabeth Barrett Browning
Recalls Robert Browning's Wooing

Against my arid, rigid self—
my supposed unyielding *Purity*—
Mr. Browning came on, pliant,
as undulant as a libertine.

I did act coy, fey, cold;
I was smoothly difficult.
I guyed up and down staircases,
always at a remove,
one gloved hand on a banister,
the other smothering my smile.
Looked I as unconquerable as Heaven.

Mon père feared I'd prove fertile,
and bear a white spouse
"swarthy droplets,"
exposing the "sooty roots" of our ancestry,
our Afro-exotic breed.

Better that I live—
swore *mon père*—
a breathing, perfumed corpse
than that my offspring wreck



the alabaster emporium
shielding our spurious *Genealogy*.

But Mr. Browning was resolute
to have me dissolute,
and after much gallant caresses,
what had been a welter of blood—
mine heart, became a mine of gold.

(When he “Frenched” me, the feel of his tongue,
serpentine, alive, in my mouth,
had me fainting in thought of his other
intrusive *Member*,
and the two of us “Frenching”
as it eeled into my drooling sex.)

Blushes—unexpected flowers—
pinked my skin, my face,
and *Vices* seemed more like *Blessings*.

As Mr. Browning loomed into our parlour,
and leaned over me at piano or at table,
our garb became more and more relaxed,
and we lounged, almost as one,
sharing *chaise longue* or settee,

then kissing....

O! the hazards of *Leisure*!

A thousand cheerful cups of sherry
I quaffed while his hot whispers
scintillated the air.

He took on apostolic *Authority*,
as I assumed supine *Submission*—
the discipline befitting a *Disciple*.



I felt myself swooning—
like the waves
before Christ's feet.

Now, I worried Mr. Browning might prefer
thin, quivering beauties—
their prosaic busts—

decorating every London theatre balcony—
that he'd choose one lovely, refreshingly young,

not my faded *Innocence*—

my dry, drab

I.

No: He straightened my tangled nerves,
taught me that indoors should flaunt fire
and outdoors vaunt stars.

We jaunted about at dusk,
haunting the sun's gleaming, gold trail
as it trailed off, shining;

and so my own once-stale "*Opulence*"
inspired his vocal eyes.

"Silvery" was I—
because he was *Chivalry*.

Next I fretted I was too alabaster in breast,
too ivory in face,

but truly I feared my father's warning:
My privy "blackness,"
generated via generation,
could yet blacken us all.



What if my babes looked darkies?

Again, Mr. Browning eased my spasmodic titters.
He pledged that we'd wed
and away to Italy,
to drowse our days amid the warm green there
that spites English frost;
and cultivate most cheerful lines
while "Frenching" Italian wines;

and spurn the damnable looking-glass
by passing off darkling chillun
as "Sicilian"

(just as Sicilians do).

Now, Londoners chastise
"unnatural Italy, Sodomite Rome,"
but I pour Chianti out a wicker bottle,
letting redness gallop down my white throat,
while my Bobby laps my lips and tits
in most spirited consumption.

Here he's Brontë's swarthy Heathcliff,
and I'm as smug as a "fellatrix."

Immeasurable *Pleasure* teases us.

I am so constantly wet,
I must gush wine.

I'm now very fond of wine.

[Baia Mare (Romania) 21 septembre mmxiii]



Memoir of Ste. Marie d'Égypte

To Aelia Capitolina—
Olde Jerusalem—
the secret city,
the sacred city of poets,
I go,
whore—
give balm to lovelorn soldiery,
deliver em doubled and redoubled glitter,
dressed-up *Fucking*,
mimicking undressed *Love*.

My quarters' diamond-and-jewel-coloured flames
hypnotize brutes,
and render troops thralls;
my hindquarters drip
a hot and enervating liquor
that dizzies every male.

In my gleaming ex-embassy—
Alexandria—
a city as maritime as the Nile—
Venus casts even Apollo in a pall.
I was, there, as mercantile as the Chinese,
and neither harassed by gold-giving pimps,
nor gouged by em.

My practice has been to suborn Christians
via *Luxury*;
to turn "*Lewdness*"
into *Prudence*—
a prudence that ends *Toils*.

Having roamed Christendom with *Cupidity*—
seducing priests and pirates alike
(with saltwater and rum)—



even I'm surprised
to find Christ

staring me down,
pityingly.

[Cluj/Napoca (Romania) 21 septembre mmxiii]



Cleopatra Eyes Julius Caesar

I.

My *Conqueror* acts as *Justice*—
Tribune for the holy
and those wholly execrable.

Mobs balladry his victories
as luminous, Mars-granted miracles—
exterminations pleasing both to plutocrats
plus gutter folks no better than dirt.

My maybe temporarylover,
this man, I pray, only temporarily, my liege—

ought to heed the harm his countrymen
did that other “J.C.,”

that obscure, if reputedly scrupulous,
prophetic rabbi,
who became the torturers’ toy:

Hammer, nails, two boards—
all that was needed
for murder most awful—
plus a Roman spear parting his ribs.

(That man’s crucifixion was,
I hear, an unearthly *Torture*;
and the result—his living *Recovery*—
is, I credit, mere rumour.)



II.

I'll signal Caesar that Rome's Senators
love us not,
that their brains seethe with gory plots,
to see him—
living monument—
stabbed to the earth
while a spear is thrust up his *fundament*.

And those who hate my honey'd skin,
are apt to slather me with actual honey,
smear my tanned marble with buttermilk,
then pin—or pen—me in some site
where stinging flies, bees, and wasps,
may irritate my every inch,
digging into even my eyes
and asshole,

so I smother in a smog of bugs:
Insects cramming every orifice,
jamming even nostrils.

III.

Caesar plays “Mr. Justice,”
but Roman *Justice* breeds worms.

The Capitol smokes with disgusting pyres—
residue of Circus-act atrocities,
where lions gulp down “Christians,” head-and-foot,
or stallions strain “saints” four limbs asunder,
or the fumes of burning turds
suffocate upside-down-held “criminals.”
Such-and-such a “tragedy” collapses Caesar,
tumble he into the senatorial *fidiculae*¹

1) Latin: Claws.



Or his “allies”—his “pals”—
will impale him with the points of pens,
perforate him transfixingly,
then press him under boulders,

like a papyrus sheet—

so his blood turns ruddy ink.

Mobs whisper he’s an extreme tyrant;
they lust to rack his body, crack his brain.

I should fly—
like the child Christ—
to my Egypt.

[Peterborough (Ontario) 14 mars mmxiii]



Septimus Clarke² Scripts Church Minutes

Light rains and light reigns.

Its downcome snares and rinses.

Where it lives—
or alights—
it arouses—

like *Love*.

Light executes a pitiless massage.
Animal flesh can't help but preen—
even if jealous gods take umbrage.

You even see light right here
in each wine-dipped line—
iridescent as surf.

(No *Opulence*
without *Turbulence*.)

We ain't piebald beings,
but incandescent—

and indecently so

(when naked).

My gold hand jets black ink
your white hand shadows.

[Szentendre (Hungary) 15 septembre mmxi]

2) First clerk of the African Baptist Association of Nova Scotia, 1853.