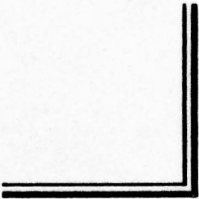
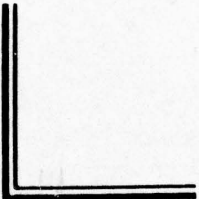


**THE POETIC CONSCIENCE
OF
AFRICAN SOULS**

**Southern Conference
on Afro-American Studies**



THE POETIC CONSCIENCE OF AFRICAN SOULS

Edited by
Dr. Patricia Robinson Williams
and
Dr. Betty Taylor-Ashe
for the
SOUTHERN CONFERENCE
ON AFRO-AMERICAN STUDIES

SOUTHERN CONFERENCE ON AFRO-AMERICAN STUDIES, INC.

President

Dr. Horace Huntley

University of Alabama - Birmingham

Vice President

Dr. James Monroe Stewart

Tennessee State University

Editor of Journal

Mrs. Shirley A. J. Hanshaw

Alcorn State University

Secretary-Treasurer

Howard J. Jones

Houston, Texas

Copyright © 1982 by the SOUTHERN CONFERENCE ON
AFRO-AMERICAN STUDIES, INC.
All rights reserved.

About the Editors

Betty Taylor-Ashe is Assistant Professor of English at Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas. Having earned the Ph.D. in English from Howard University and having pursued specialized studies in Afro-American Literature, Dr. Taylor-Ashe is a qualified critic of the Black literary expression. A poet herself, Taylor-Ashe's thoughts can be found in publications such as *Obsidian Magazine*, *College Poetry Review*, *Pegasus*, and *New Directions*.

Patricia Robinson Williams is Associate Professor of English and Acting Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas. Williams earned the Ph.D. in English at the University of Illinois in Urbana, Illinois. Evolving from the focus of her doctoral dissertation project, Dr. Williams' research activities are designed to commemorate, substantiate, and validate the Afro-American poetic tradition. She was recently funded to conduct a study of the instrumental and expressive values in the poetry of Black Houstonians produced during the 1950's. Writing poetry since her childhood days, Williams' verse has been published in scholarly journals, and she has additionally served as editor of poetry collections which have been published.

The Poetic Conscience of African Souls

Preface

The poetic conscience of African souls represents a metaphysical consummation among the creative spirits of an oppressed people REDEEMED. A cultural analogue overshadows each pulsating beat in the creative energy which flows from the pens of the transplanted African geniuses. Yet, there is an undeniable sense of "other" culture, human toleration, and revised perspective which struggles for acknowledgment and recognition. Demonstrating his unusual capacity for self-examination and regeneration, the sable bard conveniently adopts the mores and expressions of the counterculture. This adaptation, however, never admits a denial of the TRUTH and CONSCIOUSNESS of his true heritage. Thus, a NOBLE paradox emerges, which is unparalleled in the realm of human creativity.

It is in this sense that the dimensions of human response and reaction in this collection of poetry are analogous. Beginning with expressions of *folk heroism*, the poems contained herein capture the Afro-American cultural idioms from the plantation tradition to the rejuvenated folk tradition and pride of the current era. The special consciousness which coheres the African heritage with circumstances of the contemporary descendent of Africa is apparent.

A thematic arrangement has been selected to identify each group of poems. The element of plantation primitivism is acknowledged in the theme, *The Folk Heroes*. The revolutionary reactions of the oppressed Africans are highlighted in those poems identified under the

category, *Revolution and Rebellion*. The rationalization and satirical justification which characterize the African's quest for self-identity depict the section on *Reflection and Meditation*. The personhood of the transplanted African is revealed in those poems classified in the section, *Lyrical Expressions*.

Textual emendations have been made to emphasize tone and establish quality of expression.

Patricia R. Williams

Betty Taylor-Ashe

Heroism and the Folk Tradition

The folk idiom is a necessary tool in the Afro-American creative tradition. It is the medium most often used to captivate heritage and tradition. This tradition can be identified in the vibrant, rich, uniquely cultural overtones of the Afro-American's poems, the local color embodied in his choice of subject or storyline and his surrealistic elevation of indigenous folkways. Although such unorthodox manipulation of material is a claim all artists can make, there are traits peculiar to his "lore" that the Black poet uses. Roger Whitlow has characterized the folklore of the Black American in the following terms:

The folklore of the black American reveals a great deal about the way that he viewed--and views--himself and others, about the ways that he has amused himself and sustained himself in an often hostile culture....¹

Out of this attitude of self-examination which emerges into self-revelation, a quality of mythological escapism is developed. Consequently a specifically prescribed hero evolves in the characters in Afro-American narrative poems. The profile of many of these heroes represents the commonplace motifs in the most familiar Afro-American folktales. Remnants of the old "preacher" stories, the old anecdotes of the "fastest" man, tales about the sly, humble, shuffling slave who is really a master of the art of deception, these and other strains from African folklore appear and reappear in all stages in the development of the African literary tradition.

¹ Roger Whitlow, *Black American Literature: A Critical History* (Totowa, New Jersey: Littlefield, Adams and Co., 1974), p. 3.

Thus, the poems included in this section are no exception. They, too, exclaim the mythological escapism, heroism, to which the African resorts of necessity. While depicting his peculiar psychosis, however, these poets, like their predecessors, redeem their mishaps with a flutter of urbane humor.

P. R. W.

Just Another Old Good-for-nothing

Walking along the railroad tracks,
Wearing worn old tattered slacks,
Was a man almost jet black.

He stopped to pick a daisy,
So you knew then, he was crazy,
And he just looked plain lazy.

He was a pitiful creature,
No doubt, a real leacher
Or another of their old preachers.

So we yelled at him with glee
"You old chimpanzee,
Are you a zoo refugee?"

Then, off they went,
These southern gents,
After being so insolent.

The old man who was quite unlearned,
Saw a little road and there he turned.
And he just sort of seemed unconcerned.

Then he came to a grave,
And sort of gave it a wave.

"Martha," he mumbled,
As he almost stumbled.

"Here, I brought you this."
And he gave it a kiss.

"Ever-body's doing fine."
He said to the "shrine."

Then, as if in court,
He made a report.

"Our oldest son Bob, without much of a chance,
After the war, came back home from France."

"As deputy sheriff, he now serve,
And the folks say with much deserve."

"Alice who always cried so much,
Is a nurse and takes blood and such."

"Ben, the lawyer, yesterday, sent some money.
That boy is still so very funny."

"Sadie, who was always so exact,
Keeps her secretarial work intact."

"Jim is now a local school teacher,
And Arthur is a prominent Baptist preacher."

"That old playful rascal Hank?
He is vice president of the local bank."

"Tom, as President of the local NAACP,
To our future, holds much of the key."

"Winning a State Legislature seat,
Was for Roy quite a feat."

"And for the elderly, what a joy
Is our social worker LeRoy."

"Tim was always a hard working lad,
But now he just carries pencil and pad."

"A poet, he says he is going to be
Because truth he says he see."

"And the twins with which you died,
In the big city, they both reside."

"A doctor, became Cora
And an engineer became Nora."

"So you see, we didn't do so bad
With the little bit we had."

Then up he arose with a jerk
To get back to his work

Of picking up bottles and cans
With his old calloused hands,

So as to have something to sell
And make himself feel well,

Knowing that that was how he'd been able
To clothes and put meat on the table

For men and women now respected by all,
And who shall never have to crawl.

So back to the tracks he returned
Hoping to get the respect he had earned.

"Hey old nigger" a voice roared
As away the car soared.

"Why don't you go to work and get off welfare
And your own load to bear?"

"You good for nothing ape!
Get off the landscape!"

HOWARD JAMES JONES

Way Back Down and High Overthere

Way back down and high overthere
kinda sitting in the air
comes this cool silver black dude
strutting, swaying my way
standing, leaning cosmic clean
selling, buying rapping mean
loving my ear he comes nearer
holding my hand
trying to take me back down,
down
to his corner
on 'wind oh' lane
seez he wanta take care of me
life me up, show me the world
cause I got class
he ain't no ordinary nigger
ain't got time for jiving
'the black knight has come to save the black
pearl,'
that's what he'll tell my momma
he ain't got fear of no man or beast
only don't stand behind him
or turn off the lights

STEPHANIE EDWARDS

Speaking with Forked Tongue

Boy, drink that gin,
That ain't no sin.

And drink a little wine,
My, that looks fine.

Now, roll them dice!
Don't that feel nice?

Chase that hooker.
Ain't she a looker?

Steal that money,
And give it to your honey.

Your old lady, you better cuss,
And raise a whole lot of fuss.

Man, without a doubt,
That's what living is all about.

8/78

HOWARD JAMES JONES

Revolution and Rebellion

The NOBLE paradox becomes increasingly apparent as the messages of the radical poets are analyzed. The paradox appears in various dimensions and spans over at least a century of literary development in the Afro-American tradition. Some of the poetic expressions project a bitter, uncompromising tone. This tone is historical, emerging during the pre-emancipation period, assuming an accommodating dimension during the Reconstruction, masking the voice of the cynic in the early twentieth century and interjecting a rare form of satire in more contemporary expressions.

It has always been true that the Black protest writers react to some form of human or social injustice. While contesting the forms of oppression, these poets; messages are often didactic--designed to moralize.

The poems included in this section embrace the tenor of the revolutionary spirit. They are all written in a contemporary mode; but they recall the conventional tones of accommodation, cynicism, and satire.

P.R.W.

From Where I Sit

I know I'm supposed to be angry.

I know, but it's hard to be angry while I sit here in my Mao suit waiting to look at Star Trek on my super wide television screen. . .I mean. . .

I know I'm suppose to despise white folk, but there's this chick 'at the office, blonde, round. She digs me man, know what I mean. . .digs me.

I know, too, that I've got to get ready for the big fight,
but

a person could get killed like that, man. And the brothers might decide not to back a person up and you'd be dead, man.
For real, dead.

But listen here. I'll go if it gets down to that, man.

I just don't want to die. For real.

PAMELA COMBS LAWS

The New Integrity

Deny thyself!
Down with thou country! And,
Forget thou God!

If you want to work for us
You must not make a fuss;
But do what we assign
And things will go fine.

Rule number one covers all.
Do as you are ordered
And you will stand tall.

The boss is always right!
If in that you doubt
And want to make a fight,
Remember, you have no clout!

We control your very being!
You breathe when we say breathe.
And dare not think until we grant the lein.

Your God is us!
Your patriotism belongs to us!
You belong to us!
Your loyalty is only to us!

HOWARD JAMES JONES

Nobody is as lonely as a nigger with his name on the door.

He is a benchwarmer in the executive suite.
He is knit worsted and dry cleaned for special luncheons, an articulate greed pledgee for the fall line of your equal opportunity employer, a baby doll for affirmative action statisticians.

He has no rights.
He has no people.
He is alone.

Nobody is as lonely as a nigger with his name on the door.

PAMELA COMBS LAWS

Reflection and Meditation--Special Concerns

The often overwhelming pressures of Afro-American life are reflected in Afro-American poetry, and Black poets have naturally speculated and meditated on their special quandary produced by a racist society. In addition, Poetry has always been a more than satisfactory outlet for the tensions which are typical of Afro-American life. Arna Bontemps, who writes reflective and meditative poetry during the Harlem Renaissance, noted that poetry is an outlet for the thoughts and feelings of an aroused folk in time of trouble.¹

It is a testimony to the undaunted creative spirit of Black poets that in a technological age where time for reflection and meditation is a luxury, that these poets have produced quality works which demonstrate their concern about the spiritual essence of all humanity as well as the special spiritual nature of the Afro-American. If the poems in this section show a concern for the unique position of Black Americans, then it is because of the perplexity of that life style. Significantly, these reflections and meditations are expressed excellently through the medium of poetry.

Poetry, therefore, has a prominent place in Afro-American literature, and themes that meditate on the unique quality of Black American life have always been important to Black poets. Abraham Chapman noted in *New Black Voices* that there was a new breed of black writers who stress the importance of individuality and originality of the Black artist and oppose dogmatism and attempts to

¹Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, eds., *Poetry of the Negro 1746-1970* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. xxxviv.

institutionalize Blackness in any way which would tell the Black writer how he should write or what he should write about.² In this section, contemporary Black poets exhibit the variety and breadth of their reflective thought.

²Abraham Chapman, ed., *New Black Voices* (New York: New American Library, 1972), p. 41.

In Need Of

What I need at this time
Is someone to hold my hand
Comfort me and share my troubles
Talk to me and understand.

What I need at this time
Is the love and touch of a man
Holding me forever in his arms,
Gently caressing me with his hand.

What I need at this time
Is a strong shoulder to lean on
Someone to help bear my burdens
Someone who's powerful and strong.

What I need at his time
Is a place to hide and cry.
Where I can be alone to think
Whether I want to live or die.

What I need at this time
Is a guide to lead my heart
Out of the pain that surrount it
Out of the hurt that tears it apart.

What I need at this time
Is a small miracle or two
To wash away the shame and pity
And help me carry through.

LINDA JONES MALONSON

He was a man still proud
Tired now and dying
often going back home
bringing youth
through time gone.

Long hours he remembered
of daddy working hard
forever.

He remembers his young bride
working still beside him --
he recalls death and birth
names and places --
dear children close to his heart,
watchful now of dubious dealings
not knowing certain why
but his mind had told him so
and this he trusted.

His time had passed now
but uncertain of his duties
he sits alone, waiting, to tell
his tales aloud.

STEPHANIE EDWARDS

Open Wounds

You're ugly: I don't like your looks
Is what my husband said
He might as well take a gun
And fill my chest with lead.

For with these words he killed me
And there is no turning around
My soul rumble within my body
And my spirit could not be found.

I sat down and cried that day
And the days passed on
I could not find it in myself
To leave my self along,

I wanted my ears to go deaf
And to please close out the sound
Of hearing this man I love
Putting my confidence down.

After nine years of marriage
And five children to raise
I felt as if I was eighty years old
And six feet in my grave.

He could not understand
What he had did to cause such a fuss
I scream, and scream and scream
As if my lung would bust.

In anger "He said"
I spoke in haste
But my ears were closed
And his words went to waste.

I'll rise up in the morning
My face will meet his face
My mind will be there to function
My heart will be dead in its place.

Because of those few words
I'm dead and cold as steel
Because of those few words
The wounds will never heal.

There is a reason I'm told
For everything on earth
I', finding it hard to understand
Why human beings give birth.....;

LINDA JONES MALONSON

Letter

Dope fiends lean into death,
nod overmuch,
trust only rusted, blood crusted spikes
that pull, that fill, that drain, that flood
haplessly away,
everything.

"Pull me out of my poor me."

Wasted woe was never my style.

Dope fiends find soft solace
in liquid elasticity,
a most finite dessert.

This is a love letter really.

You always laughed to me,

"If you catch me in yesterday . . ."

HERMINE PINSON

Through his triumph and glory
alone he cannot rise
On his failings and faults
again I lend my hand
To want and deny
self-pain in which he dwells
Host of many faces
he displays
Admirably he plays his roles
never foreseeing his lost
'til it is lost to him forever.

STEPHANIE EDWARDS

Then and Now

In early dewy morn
We looked forlorn
For another of our dusky mates
Wondering what had become his fate.

Twasn't like him not to show
Or for work to be slow.
Women whined, and men pined,
But our mate, we could not find.

Further into the woods we dwelled
In this man made living hell.
Then, before all our eyes
Stood the truth of America's lies.

There, hanging from a cross
Was another of humanity's loss.
Our friend was gone.
But for what reason was not known.

Had they accused him of rape?
Or was it just another attempt to escape...
To escape from their own inner emptiness!
Could it be that they know black is best?

And they try to compensate
By wiping the slate
Of stolen African seeds
To cover their dastardly deeds.

That was then,
And this is now.

From the deltas of Louisiana he sprang.
But over the nation he sang
Let freedom ring.

A Georgia Congressman
With a Bible in his hand---
A member of the freedom band...

With MLK he had fought
Before a bullet the King had caught.
And for dollars he would not be bought.

Then in the White House came Carter,
Who for black votes bartered
In political ways long chartered.

"To the UN you go," he said
"And there be not led,
Just use your head."

A very outspoken man he became.
Speaking truth was his game,
Unfortunately, to his nation's shame.

"He must go!" from east to west they cried.
And with power from north to south they vied
To destroy him cause they said he lied.

"Human rights to all men
We must defend"
WAS the president's end.

So the dusky men from Georgia asked
Is the Wilmington Ten too much of a task?
Or must their imprisonment be masked?

And the Dawson Five,
Their lot is no jive,
Freedom they can not imbibe.

No more of this talk the nation would take,
For the foundations were beginning to shake.
The head man could not be proven a fake.

The man from Georgia would soon be
homeward sent
With total ruling class consent
For dissension was the thing he rent.

Crosses in forms do change.
However, black men still hang,
And "Freedom" still ring.

This is now,
And so it was then. 8/78

HOWARD JAMES JONES

I entered the room
there he sat, stiff and silent.
My words reached out
and turned his head
He spoke of being, with confidence and certainty
I left the room and left his world.
I couldn't stop feeling his
simplicity, his fear--

STEPHANIE EDWARDS

Blues

The day has tripped to a dizzying stillness,
And here I sit numbly, dumbly
Picking, tidying, and dusting.

I sift through the mind's debris for mental matter
That has collected in crevices and corners,
Beside opaque walls, in the labyrinth.

Actions that should have been clean, sure
Reverberated in uncertainty.

(My shrunken resolve dropped softly to the ground,
Just so much dust and puffs of dust).

I shift in my ill-ease as I sift.

Tomorrow . . .

HERMINE PINSON

IN CONCERT

I when I'm dancing along

 becoming one

H with the

A

T music

E

 and

I the drummer begins to solo

T

PAMELA COMBS LAWS

The Poet: Tatter-times

The poet turned mind-mole
burrows deep into self
to quibble over what's and who's
in the confining darkness.

In raspy whispers the modern morbid scratches
through the iced ashes that were his souls -
his mother's his father's
to find - - out.

Lost others bleat in the night,
whine on metal mountain tops,
"I am . . . I am . . . I think . . ."
I say what?

In tatter-times things go on
and on as usual.

HERMINE PINSON

Does he evade into darkness
like the others did?
Little Light shines upon him
Though darkness holds light brightly
within him.

There is a glow within him --
There is a smile
He is walking but it seems
sometimes
out of sight, miles away.

He comes to me always --
He listens but what did I say?
Selfish man, go away
or come again;
Do as you please
only to me

I know him from dreams
gone by
Tales told and remembered;
Touching my breath
Taking it away
Whistling moments harmonizing
throughout the loneliness, emptiness,
of motionless air
coldest of nights warmed
by his presence, his forever --
The fire does not burn yet
The fire will blaze soon
to warm coldest of nights.

STEPHANIE EDWARDS

Paper Man

The wind has scattered your remains in the park
with no trees.

Strips of Dagwood cartoons from Sunday's newspaper
lie in an unholy heap on the ground.

Tragic funnies frayed and faded rattle in crumpled
dignity as the wind blows over them.

The pieces are still there somewhere in the park
in the same shredded order you left them.

I cannot bring myself to do it
to gather the litter,
the little that is left now.

Hours and dreams ago,

I lost you laughing
through the mirror at ourselves.

You said, "If you catch me in yesterday . . ."

And you never finished.

Was it me?

I ask you.

Was it you?

Who did it?

Who decidedly decided
to change their minds
about this . . . this?

HERMINE PINSON

LYRICAL EXPRESSIONS -- PERSONAL EMOTIONS

Poetry has always been the special medium for expressing emotions creatively through language. In the past, Afro-American poets have not taken time for the writing of "love poems" because the intense social and political pressures caused by living in a racist society found creative outlet in writing literature in the protest tradition. Therefore, social and political concerns left little time to meditate on the emotions which reflect the personal relationships between men and women. Consequently, the earliest known Afro-American poets such as Jupiter Hammon and Phillis Wheatley wrote no personal poetry about their human relationships; rather, they confined and limited their poetry to religious and political themes. Later, the writers of the Harlem Renaissance and beyond continued to use themes which reflected social and racial issues and conflicts.

These thematic expressions remained the primary realm of Afro-American poets through the sixties and into the contemporary period; however, in this section we see that Afro-American poets now feel that they have time and freedom to express intensely personal and emotional thoughts about the relationship of men and women in their poetry.

The poems contained in this section represent the channeling of creative thought into the personal aspects of Black American life that have heretofore not been a significant theme of Black poets. These poems demonstrate that contemporary Afro-American poets sense that poetry expressing the emotions produced by personal human relationships, with a twist that reflects the unique quality of Black American life, deserves an important place in their writing.

B. E. T.

When a Black Man Smiles

When a Black man smiles, I see
moonlight over Memphis
and a starlit river reflecting a
heavenly image.

When a Black man smiles, there is
dinner on the table--
fresh greens, fried chicken
and maybe a fruit-filled pie.

The sun is on the horizon
when a Black man smiles,
bringing warmth and energy
to the children of his lineage.

And in the dark velvet night
there is a special, starry message
when a Black man smiles -- at me.

DENISE CARREATHERS ARMSTRONG

No Song

Disjointed jazz moves in abstract colors
Through smoky parlors, accusing and insinuating
Where mystics while away their dreams in hours:
Only the music moves.

He smiles benignly at the round eyed woman.

They smile benignly at each other.

The eyes meet, but they do not touch.

He says, "You are the only real one
in a room where parallel people lie and lie."

She says, "Oh, I play the disconsolate lady bit.

It always knocks 'em dead,

Or me instead."

He says, "Come with me.

I'm taking the last train out."

HERMINE PINSON

I know how to write a poem. It's easy. Just stare at the words in my brain. I write poems about me and my friends and I write poems about how I feel about things, which ain't always easy because I feel more than I think.

I write poems about falling in love and wanting to be in love and just about to get it together love, but I hardly ever write poems about love. It hurts too much and the sand in my wanting self just wants to shake and shiver when it realizes how much I want to be loved.

My poems are now about a handsome African who will carry me back to Africa, but he never loves me back and he doesn't know anything about Africa. So, I just keep writing these silly, feeling poems.

Just remember--

I know how to write a poem.

PAMELA COMBS LAWS

He stands stark
lean tall
Piercing through
my soul --
Teaching, hearing
and learning
giving and taking;
sharing all
He speaks low
smooth clear
washing doubt away
feeling the hidden passions within,
he reaches out
to touch me
to take me
away
somewhere
far, far away --
I step up to follow
he steps away
and leaves his
SHADOW

STEPHANIE EDWARDS

DAYDREAMS

SAY	I LOVE YOU
SAY	I NEED YOU
SAY	I WANT YOU ALWAYS
SAY	I WANT TO LIVE WITH YOU
SAY	I WANT TO DIE WITH YOU
SAY IT	
SAY IT	
SAY IT	(I LOVE YOU)
SAY IT	(I NEED YOU)
SAY IT	(I WANT YOU ALWAYS)
SAY IT	(I WANT TO LIVE WITH YOU)
SAY IT	(YOU MUST DIE FOR ME)

PAMELA COMBS LAWS

A Black Man's Love Song

A Black man's love song
is a home spun melody
harmonizing softness, sweetness
and passion.

Brother man's love song
is a street corner rap
measuring the inventiveness of his nature
and his lover's reaction.

Notes no others dare touch
are explored in a Black man's love song
ranging from rich and full
to short and tragic.

My spirit is enriched by the depth
of my man's love song
and for me, no other's holds
such magic.

DENISE CARREATHERS ARMSTRONG

I watch your smoothness
your disconcert
I notice your body, mannerisms,
vanity
You're untouched in a moving world
moving on in rhythm to your own
fast steps

STEPHANIE EDWARDS

In his eyes
there is deep
hidden Tragedy
his lips alone
show courage
his brow is
smooth like
winter blown
snowflakes
his face gleams hope.

STEPHANIE EDWARDS

He speaks silently
I cannot hear his words
I cannot read his signs
I cautioned him away
Though he did not understand
or said the view wasn't clear
I brushed away the clouds
and pulled the sun into view
but still
his words were silent unheard.

STEPHANIE EDWARDS

Without and Within

Loneliness is like a single star
Hanging in the heaven alone.
Loneliness is when your man leaves
Comes back and treat you wrong.

Loneliness is a sad song
That's sung many times.
Loneliness is a secret drink
Of apple and grape wine.

Loneliness is a child's tears
When mother and father fight.
Loneliness is a poor dog
Who's too damn hungry to bite.

Loneliness is a man and woman
Who can't do right for wrong.
Loneliness is the two of them
Destroying their happy home.

LINDA JONES MALONSON

I

hate to tell you this but

your

sun is going to m

e

l

t

tomorrow

d

r

i

p

p

i

n

g

sweet corn and

milk butter

all over this earth and its people

PAMELA COMBS LAWS

A
TRIBUTE
TO MY MOTHER
THE FIRST BLACK
"MISSISSIPPI MOTHER-OF-THE-YEAR"
(Mrs. Mary Alice Gillespie James)

I

Way back there
In 1915
Before I was even thought of
He made you.
How was anyone to know
You'd someday be
Mother-of-the-Year?

Thru all the runny noses
Sniffles and sneezes
You were there
Trying your best then as now
To do what pleases
Us.

Thru first days of school
And graduations
You were there
With tears of joy
And congratulations
For us.

Thru all the sleepless nights
Of ghosts and goblins and nightmares

You were there
To caress
And soothe away cares
For us.

II

Follow my example
Your unspoken catechism
Love unselfishly
Your creed
Walk circumspectly
Your motto
Be humble and self-denying
Your deed.

III

Mama,
You didn't have to give dad and all nine of us
Most of your time
But you did.

You didn't have to
Toil over your sewing machine
Just so we'd have decent
Clothes to wear
But you did.

You didn't have to
Get up before daylight
To start the fire
So we would be warm on arising
But you did.

You didn't have to lend
Your time and energy
Helping to maintain our three-room school
Being a good church worker
But you did.

You didn't have to be
A fine wife
An excellent mother
A good community and church worker
But you were
And are.

And we're proud.
And we thank you.

IV

Since childhood
I can remember that
You always had a song
To carry you thru the day
I can hear you now
Singing...

"Jesus paid it all
All to him I owe..."

But you've paid too, MOM,
Paid like those strong
Black women of the past.
Like HARRIET TUBMAN
Conductor of the Underground Railroad
Making physical freedom a reality
Rather than a dream.
Like SOJOURNER TRUTH
Crusader for Blacks and women
Long before 'Women's Lib' came on the scene.
Like LUCY TERRY
First Black female poet
Audacious enough to try enrolling her son
In a white university
Even before the Emancipation Proclamation.
Like PHYLLIS WHEATLEY
A poet of pure African descent
Whose brilliantly crafted verses
Spoke vicariously of freedom in a slave society.

Like MARY McLEOD BETHUNE
Crusader for Black education
Whose ideas educated a President
And founded a college.
Like MAHALIA JACKSON
'A Black and well-known bard'
Singing the sorrow songs of
Modern American bondage.
Like FANNIE LOU HAMER
The little lady from the Delta
A fighter for the rights of
The dispossessed, the disenfranchised,
The dirt farmer, the day
And night laborer
A legend in her own time.
Yes, MOM, you've paid
Like all of these
And, believe me,
It has not been in vain.

Y

Though riches you have not
Great your possessions are.
You have
Hands that have hoed cotton, hewn wood
Held babies, hushed tears
Helped hungry souls to God.
Though toil has taken a toll
On these hands
Smooth as clay they are.

You have
A smile as brilliant
As a sparkling spring
On a warm summer's day
Greeting all you meet with
A message of love.
You have
A quiet, unassuming demeanor

Holding in abeyance any outburst
Of anger or anguish.

MOM,

If the scales of justice
Were balanced as evenly
As your temper
All dishonest men would be bound
All just men free.

VI

To end this poem

Is difficult

Be-cause

YOU

Are still very much a part

Of me

And will be

For as long as I live

So I'll just

Stop

Here with

L-C-V-E

SHIRLEY JAMES HANSHAW