

# Onlyx

The Black Literary Experience

1989 Edition

Number 3

# Onyx



## MANAGING EDITORS

Shaba Holley

Lisa Manning

## EDITORIAL STAFF

Jenelle Walthour

Natasha Labaze

*Onyx is an independent, nonprofit student organization.*

## Contents

4	Haiti	<i>Natasha Labaze</i>
4	Untitled	<i>Linda Montero</i>
4	Why Didn't You Leave Us in Our Country?	<i>Natasha Labaze</i>
5	Always	<i>Michelle E. Owens</i>
5	A Night in My Dreams	<i>Khisha Pratt</i>
6	Looking Down	<i>Avril</i>
6	Untitled	<i>Anthony Williams</i>
8	Sister's Bench	<i>Natasha Labaze</i>
8	Mirage	<i>Avril</i>
9	Evans County	<i>Patrick Keenan</i>
13	Un Poema Para Ti	<i>Michelle E. Owens</i>
15	Untitled	<i>Lisa Manning</i>
15	Untitled	<i>Natasha Labaze</i>
15	The Chimney Without a Fire	<i>Natasha Labaze</i>
16	The Last Time	<i>Anthony Snowden</i>
16	Blue Hearts Bleed	<i>Natasha Labaze</i>
16	No Tears	<i>Michelle Reid</i>
17	The Man	<i>Avril</i>
17	Too Late the Apology	<i>Linda Montero</i>
18	Still Living and Still Life	<i>Anthony Snowden</i>
18	Boy Next Door	<i>Anthony Snowden</i>
19	A Little Black Girl	<i>Natasha Labaze</i>
20	The Hands of the Poor	<i>Natasha Labaze</i>
22	In the End	<i>Avril</i>
22	Decisions	<i>Avril</i>
23	Paradox	<i>Anthony Williams</i>

## Art Credits

*C.E. Smith*

*Michelle Reid*

## Haiti

Haiti-green island  
lonely heart  
floating  
all alone  
on the blue ocean  
Shining pearl of the West Indies  
The oyster cracked  
CRACK!!!!!!  
My pearl floats  
Misery  
A hot sun dries the tears of my people  
The dry salt of tears stains  
my children's cheeks  
Haiti  
Where is your SAUVEUR?  
Rulers,  
Please, leave the pearl alone  
It doesn't belong to anyone but HAITI!

—Natasha Labaze

## Why Didn't You Leave Us in Our Country?

Yesterday was spring. Today it's cold.  
Thin slippery ice covers the earth.  
One slip and I'm on the floor.  
Why didn't you leave us in our country?  
Where sunshine is part of my life.  
Where palm trees sway gently with the wind.  
Where my bare feet can touch the dewy grass every morning.  
But no. Here I am in this bitter cold country.  
Brought here from the deep womb of my foremothers, who  
came here to slave for you.  
Now I am here. Do I belong here?  
No. Do I want to be here?  
Nobody ever asked me.  
Now I am here.  
I have to feed the children.  
So I spend my life in the factory,  
Adding caps to soda bottles.

—Natasha Labaze

Lying in bed with warm cotton sheets.  
Windows open and I hear soft sounds of Miles  
being carried out by the wind.  
I've always wanted to be here.

—Linda Montero

## Always

I cry at the story that you tell of your father's death. Because I, like you, have experienced the hurt and pain of not having a loved one around when I really needed him.

After a long battle with Alzheimer's disease and constantly hearing the words "I'm sorry, but there is no cure," being formed on the doctor's lips, my granddaddy died.

No longer would I be able to look into his beautiful hazel-blue eyes and think that because of this man, there is life in me. When he died so did a part of me. I began to question myself. If it was he who gave me life, then how . . . how am I able to exist without him?

As I searched my soul for the answer, I realized the complexity of the question. All I had to cling to were memories. When I allow memories to enter my mind, I am able to see granddaddy's hazel-blue eyes shining brighter than ever before. His eyes tell the story, the story of our memories. His eyes are a reminder of the good times that I have shared with him. They are my life. Because of them, I realize that he never left me.

He is always there when I need him.

Always . . .

—Michelle D. Owens

## A Night in My Dreams

I was in a world all my own, that night in my dreams.  
No one could touch me  
no one could make my eyes misty  
no friends could betray me  
no parents could leave me  
no one could deny me but myself.  
I was above all else  
above all fears  
above Earth itself  
that night in my dreams.

Below myself and my world  
I could see waves rolling in.  
I could see those waves of hurt  
those waves of sorrow.  
I could see those people suffering  
all those people who betrayed me  
all those who caused me despair.  
I could see them all rolling in toward a distant shore  
searching for me  
lapping at those rocks  
wanting to drown me  
that night in my dreams.

I looked down smiling for the first time  
in a long time.  
The waves could not reach me  
that night in my dreams.

That night when my world began to sink  
when my earth began to crumble and shake  
when the waves reached me  
I awoke to a world full of those who have hurt me  
I awoke drowning under waves of humiliation.  
My world was gone.  
It had shattered and disappeared  
under the crushing waves  
It had left me afloat, struggling to keep my  
head above the water.  
Then I realized  
my world had never existed.  
Things were always this way  
But I'd had a few moments of freedom  
that night  
if only in my dreams

—Khisha Pratt

## Looking Down

The gray clouds  
    cascade around the world  
the cold, naked earth tones

the serenity of my surroundings  
people below  
tall, erect figures  
    White people  
where are all the black ones?  
    hiding, shuddering  
    in the cold.

"Why?"  
I ask  
then I see the life  
the lives—  
    of them—  
    down below.

—Avril

*Untitled: Depersonalized and Watered Down to Satisfy a European Professor*

So the world's a stage for all civilians to play,  
But some citizens' metaphors don't describe it that way.  
Many laymen hungrily die on the streets;  
While aristocrats seek the best places to eat.  
Though they've overpaid their dues to get in to watch the show,

They often wonder why they are confined to the back row.  
We allow aristocratic charlatans to coin the reasons why,  
But its hard to see with complacency etched in their eyes.  
Financed by old money they've traveled the world inspite,  
And did not stop to listen to the unpaid South Africans  
speak of human rights.

Well, some diabolical seamstress has dressed the world in  
placating garb,  
And forgot to tell the angry bard.  
Some avaricious miscreants captivated the diaspora with  
the only Bill of Rights,  
For this realization their constituents will fight.  
Will America hear its oppressed warranted shrilling cry?  
Or will limousine liberals perpetuate behind the ostensible  
sigh?

They've increased their treasures and shown crocodile  
tears,  
Unscrupulously disregarding the laymen's fears.  
America, the beautiful, with its magnolia tree,  
Some know what these branches harbor when they seek to  
be free.

While others hang from these beautiful magnolia trees.  
Land of the free, home of the brave,  
Lest heroes would be confined when it's people they must  
save.  
Such realities sound outlandish when presented in  
irrational form,  
But mindless greed has determined this should be the  
norm.  
Well, moralists say rip the clothes of reality's imposter  
It it's morality for the people you foster.

—Anthony Williams



M.M.R.,

## Sister's Bench

You say you care.  
You say your heart beats.  
I can't hear the drumming of your heart.  
Stop, touch, feel, care.  
Hear the cry of the woman lying on the bench of Fifth Avenue.  
The smell of pretzel drifting.  
The smell of putrid horse manure.  
The zoo her friendly neighbor.  
The empty tall buildings with a million lighted windows.  
She shivers. It's cold.  
She trembles. Robbers, Rapists. . .  
And President Reagan says, "the homeless like living outdoors.  
there are plenty of shelters."  
Home!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!  
Home — not shelters.  
Peace — not arms.  
Heart beats — not bombs' booms.  
There is no roof over my sister's bench.  
Her one twinkling star sheds a tear.

—Natasha Labaze

## Mirage

We have improved  
They have acknowledged  
Got what we wanted  
Foundations are solid

Equal; Just  
Expansion of mind  
No sign of repression  
This time it's fine

It's just a mirage  
Seems to be true  
But. . .Wait!  
We still have work to do.

—Avril



## Evans County

Major Chapman woke up when he heard the sound of the horses on clay. The clay muffled the sound, but he knew that there were at least ten of them, and when they stopped all together, he knew that they had riders. He looked over at Lucille snoring softly next to him. She never woke up in the night unless he woke her up, and then she was glad he did. He wished that they could pretend that it was just like any other night; that they would be up together for the few hours until morning.

The light from the riders' torches lit up the single room in which they lived. Major looked at the corner opposite the bed. There was a stove and an icebox. Lucille said that getting the icebox was almost as good as having a baby, which she hoped to do next year.

He leaned over to touch Lucille and wake her up. Their horsehair mattress whined when he moved, and the noise made him freeze with fear. The mattress was new, but their bed frame had been Lucille's parents. Next to the bed was the only door. They couldn't go straight from their home to Major's church, to which the room was attached. They had to go outside and walk past the trees to the front of the church. On the other side of the bed was their dresser. Frederick Douglass's picture looked at them, and reminded Major of what he wanted to be. He wished he could be as forceful as Douglass. Having the name Major got him some respect, but he still had to say or do something to be respected as much as he wanted to be. Douglass was never afraid, and Major had hoped to bring that message with him when he became minister of the church six months before.

Now, Major lay still, trying to breathe without moving. He was afraid to even think too loud because he didn't want to announce his presence. He wanted to just sink into the mattress, slide into the horsehair, and walk out of his house like a horse. The riders would be so stunned that they would just watch him go. He couldn't imagine what the riders were doing outside and why they hadn't done something by now. They had been there only a few seconds, but Major had sensed them forever.

"Lucille, wake up." His words were barely a whisper.

"What - what do you want?" Lucille said in a breathy, too-loud voice that made him stiffen.

"There are riders in our yard. They're on horses, just waiting." He was trying to talk without moving and making the mattress whine again. She was awake now.

"I told you they were coming. Dammit, I told you not to!"

"You liked it when I said it."

"The Lord is my helper: I will not fear what man can do unto me. I knew we'd pay soon enough for that kind of talk."

"People come to church looking for hope." He had to keep thinking about how he was supposed to feel. He was the leader, and though he was even more afraid than she was, he had to remind himself that he wasn't going to act afraid.

"You got everybody all riled up. I knew this was coming."

"Major Chapman, get out here boy!" The rider's voice rang out and made Lucille gasp. They had been talking about fear — this was real.

"If you go, you'll die. Talk through the window, where they can't touch you."

"How? They'll just burn us out."

He got up and walked in his shorts to the dresser. It had been whitewashed, but the old black wood showed through. He pulled on his grey pants and buttoned up his old white shirt that she had patched. He watched her on the bed, her face down into the pillow.

He opened the door and its squeak was the only sound he heard. Outside in the yard, he saw eighteen men and fifteen horses. The horses and three of the men were black. Luther Johnson was standing off to Major's left. He was next to Elmer Anderson and Marcus Simms, and they were in front of the row of horses and riders. The light from the riders' torches made the black men's skin the same deep red as the clay.

"Get over there," yelled the rider in front of him and behind Elmer. Major did as he was told. The circle of horses closed behind him. He could see only Luther's face clearly; the others were just shadows from the torches. He could tell that Luther wanted to shout at the men. Luther always sat at the back of Major's church, because his wife Lettie usually had a baby to take out and stop from crying. Luther would shout out "Yes Lord" to back up the best points of Major's sermons. Major had known that Luther would be the most influenced by his sermons on pride. Luther was a black-smith, and he had stopped fixing white men's horseshoes for free. He said that everybody had to pay the same as everybody else. When he did this, two white bankers came to see him and to tell him that he had no call to stop doing things the way they had always been done. Luther told them that maybe things had always been done wrong.

Major hadn't thought that Marcus Simms had even agreed with his sermons. Marcus would nod his head at the things that made Luther say "Yes Lord" in church. He was only eighteen, and he still lived with his mother, Willie. Major had met Willie the second day he lived in Evans County when she came by with some black-eyed peas for good luck on the day after New Year. Marcus came with her, but he didn't say much. He worked at the grocery store and didn't seem to mind being called "boy" by people younger than he was. Major was shocked when, after his third sermon, Marcus had told a thirteen-year-old boy that he should call him "Mr. Simms." He almost lost his job, but he apologized to Mr. Green, his boss, and to the boy's parents, and didn't get fired.

Major wasn't sure why Elmer was here. He was twenty-one, but he never seemed to notice why black people had problems.

*(continued on page 10)*

*(continued from page 9)*

Major was looking around the circle trying to see if he could recognize any of the men, but their white sheets made them almost invisible. He thought that they looked like ghosts floating above the black men, and that if he and Luther and Elmer and Marcus all blew hard enough, they could blow the ghosts away. He noticed that the wind was howling and thought that if they were going to leave on the wind, they'd have left by now.

"You boys know why you're here?" The rider behind him yelled, and surprised Major so much that he took a step forward. Now his face was only about two feet from Elmer's. He could see the tears glistening on Elmer's cheeks. Major waited for one of the other white men to say something before he tried to talk. All the words that had filled him when he was with Lucille left him now. The sweaty smell of the horses surrounded them when the wind died down. Now, there was silence.

"You boys are here on account of your preacher. He's preached some lies, and we're here to help you get less confused. Now, do you know what he said wrong?" The same rider spoke.

Major thought of when he had been in college and his teacher used to stand in front of the class and ask them what was wrong with someone's sermon. As long as they based the criticism on the Bible, there were no wrong answers. He could only think of wrong answers now.

"Major, do you know where you went wrong? You said it. You did this." Major kept thinking that he could say, "Well Reverend White, I preached about pride, and I forgot the Psalm that says 'Where pride is, there shall also be reproach.'" There was no way for him to tell the white men that, and he couldn't look afraid in front of the people in his church.

"Major, do you expect us to believe you forgot already? Now we know just what you said. There are people in your church who are smart enough to tell us what happens there. You said that the Lord was your helper, and you wouldn't be afraid of what men can do unto you. You said be proud and stand up."

"I remember. It came from the Bible." Major was barely listening to the white men. He was hearing Marcus hum "When the Saints Come Marching In" and thinking that he never made any noise in church. He looked at Elmer, who was crying harder now. Major wanted to reach out to him and tell him to stop crying and start praying. He could smell something besides the horses. He saw the wet spot in the front of Elmer's pants and tried not to look. He moved a little to his right so that his shadow fell across Elmer and covered up the spot. Now Luther was entirely in the light, and Major was taken by how big he was. Luther was six feet, three inches tall, about two inches taller than Major, and was as well muscled as the horses. Major kept thinking that he and Luther could fight with any three of the white men and win.

"Yes boy, the Bible does say to be proud, but you can't be stupid. These other boys don't realize that what's written in the Bible is old, it doesn't work exactly as it's written." He wanted to forget everything. He tried to forget every night when he closed the door and pretended that everyone else

in the world was black too. He wanted everyone in his church to forget so that they could talk as freely and live as well as they did every Sunday.

"You boys just don't understand. Everything here is ours. You wouldn't even be here if we didn't bring you. Now where does Luther get off saying that everyone has to pay the same price?"

Major was struggling to hear. The wind was picking up and his words blew in his face. The rider behind him was talking and his words blew back into the church. He wished that Elmer had pulled down his pants to piss. If Major had moved, the wind would have blown it all over the man who was talking. He would have a yellow robe. Major had to piss and wanted to turn around and see if he could cover the man himself. He couldn't do anything but hold it in.

"We know who we are. We work hard and don't bother no one. Why bother with us?" Marcus yelled this to make it heard over the wind, but the wind died down and his voice just exploded and then faded over the fields. Major hadn't thought of anyone but him or Luther talking. Marcus looked surprised that he had spoken, but he still looked like he could cry. Major knew as soon as Marcus spoke that he shouldn't have.

"You don't know well enough. You can't tell someone to call you 'Mr.' That's crazy. You going to have to leave Evans County. Things here ain't changing any time soon." Major heard him, but he didn't really understand. He couldn't leave. They had just moved the icebox into the house. It had taken them three hours to get it in, and now they couldn't just turn around and take it out.

"There's been colored here as long as there's been white. We got families and houses here. My grandfather's grave is here. I can't leave." Luther was shouting, and everyone heard every word. Luther and Marcus just didn't get it. Major knew that the riders probably just wanted to hear all their words and then they'd ride away. He knew that if he didn't talk about pride or a better place for six months or even a year, they'd leave him alone. Luther would keep charging white people, but Marcus would still be called boy. Things would change slowly. But Luther's words were a challenge. Now, the riders had to do something, they couldn't just ride away.

"One of you boys is going to die tonight. It's got to be clear."

There hadn't been anyone killed here since Major came to Evans County. He couldn't think of what would happen if someone actually died. He remembered when his uncle Joseph died and everyone came and told what a fine man he was. Even white people came to say how much they liked old Joe Chapman. He died in the orchard, under his peach trees.

"No one's got to die. We'll leave. I understand." Elmer shook as he spoke, and the tears kept coming.

"We know you understand Elmer. You're one of the smart ones. But no one else knows." Major knew now that they must have asked Elmer about the sermons, and he had told them. He wouldn't understand not to. They'd probably

have to leave for a couple of weeks. Then he and Lucille could come back and he'd preach again. He wanted to ask one of the riders if he could borrow a horse for the trip because Lucille hated the train. He knew that Luther would fix the horse's shoes if Major was using it.

"You can all die together, or one of you can step up and hang alone. That's the only choice. Reverend, you want to die like Christ?"

He heard the words, but he didn't really understand. He kept thinking that he had never preached at a funeral before. This was his first church. There were a lot of things he hadn't done yet. He had heard funeral sermons before, but he had never given one. Maybe Lucille could help him write it.

"Major, you get to choose what you want to do. Did you mean you weren't afraid, or are you?"

He couldn't say anything. He knew that he preached what was in the Bible, so he believed it. But he was afraid. These men were here with torches and a rope and God wasn't. He could hear his pulse in his ears. He wanted to say, No, I'm not afraid. The rope would be around him and he'd swing with the wind. Who would speak at his funeral? He'd have to get Reverend Garson from Polk County to do it. Lucille would sit alone in the front row. His brother Matt would put his arms around her and walk her home. He couldn't die now. He'd just gotten his church, his chance. He had known when he came here that he'd talk about pride. He already had the Bible verses picked out. He had a calendar of when to start and when to give the one about not being afraid of men and the one about all men going to the same heaven and hell and living there together. Things were just starting.

"I - I can't die. I got to be here for the living." He wasn't sure where the words came from. Maybe that was really why he couldn't die. He hoped that Lucille couldn't hear what he had said. He wished that the wind was blowing away from the church. He wanted to slip off his skin, the skin that he told his people to be proud of, and find a white robe underneath and mount a horse and ride away.

"You can't die? We're men and you aren't afraid of what men can do to you. This is no way to be proud!"

He couldn't move. They were right that he couldn't be proud, but at least now no one would die. They had made him afraid in front of the people he preached to. He knew that you probably got only one chance to choose life or death. Death usually finds you. He wanted to make this like a party and politely change the subject. He would stop talking about hanging and start talking about how Terry Hatcher's twin boys were growing and they were going to be bigger than their father soon.

"Now do you boys see? He ain't anything. Someone still has to die, or you'll all die."

Major could see Marcus rocking back and forth, singing and crying. Elmer looked at Major and smiled. He was still crying, but he was looking right at Major.

"I'll do it. I'm not scared. My dad can live without me." Elmer was shaking as he spoke. He seemed as surprised as Colonel at what he had said. Elmer lived with his father and

did the work on their farm. He could never learn to read or write and needed his father to take care of the paperwork. Major knew that Elmer did most of the work because his father was so old, but the old man couldn't manage alone.

"Are you going to let this boy die? You got him into this and you're going to let him hang?" Major kept thinking that the riders would all go away. That he'd look up and see the torches making a jagged trail of light across the field. He wanted to scream, "I'm not going to let him die. I'll hang!" but he couldn't move. He stood there looking at his boots with lace that had broken and been knotted.

The rider who had done most of the talking rode over to Elmer and got off his horse. "Turn around." Elmer turned and the rider tied his hands with a thin piece of clothesline. If they hanged him with rope that thin, the rope would snap and he'd live. Elmer got on the rider's horse and the white man led the horse to one of the trees. One of the riders had thrown the rope over a branch already. The noose had been at the end of the rope the entire time. One of the riders still on his horse bent Elmer's head over until his chin touched his shirt. The rider put the noose around Elmer's neck and pushed the sliding knot down until it was tight around Elmer's neck.

"Stop! I'll die — don't make that boy die!" Major had to do something even though he knew it was too late. They had found something better than killing him: letting him kill Elmer.

"You had your chance. He's going to die and you can preach about pride all you want."

"No — I'm the one you came for."

"We got you boy." The wind howled again. "You get to live."

The rider on the ground took out his pistol. He had to dig up under his robe and almost pushed his hood off. The eyeholes were on top of his head. The horses jumped at the first shot, and Elmer's horse jumped at the second. His horse reared up before it ran, so the rope went from straight to slack to perfectly straight in a second. Elmer's arms were tied behind him, and shot straight out in back of him, then fell. He was swaying back and forth from the horse running away, but slowing down because half the time the wind was holding him up. The riders watched him sway and Major fell to his knees watching his friend jerk and blink. Major could see Marcus's shadow turn away as he turned away from the death. Major watched Luther standing still, his hands on his hips, looking dejected, as if he had just lost five dollars on a cockfight. Major saw that the riders had lost a horse, he had lost a life.

After a few minutes, Elmer stopped moving and just hung still, not affected by the wind. All at once, one of the riders picked up the white man on the ground and they all rode across the field. The light from the torches was not as beautiful as Major had imagined. Major looked at Elmer and knew they'd have to cut him down. Luther walked over and touched Elmer's leg. Major realized that to cut him down, he'd have to hold him closer than he'd ever held a man before. He stood behind Luther and watched Elmer hang.

*(continued on page 12)*

*(continued from page 11)*

Then they turned and walked with Marcus to the house.

Lucille was sitting at the table crying. It was the table that Major wrote his sermons on and Lucille served dinner on. She had a knife on the table in front of her. Major touched her hand with his and she held it. Slowly, he moved away and picked up the knife. Luther sat Marcus down in the chair across from Lucille and the two men walked outside. Major walked around back and got the old crate that used to hold tins of pecans. He carried the crate and the knife to where Elmer hung. Elmer's tongue was starting to swell and stick out between his lips. Major gave the knife to Luther and looked away.

"Take hold of his legs. I'll cut the rope and you don't let him fall." Luther got up on the crate and looked like he'd done this before. Major tried to touch Elmer as little as possible. He held the legs without looking at him. He heard the sawing and then the snap of the knife cutting the rope, and then Elmer was in his arms. He stumbled, and Luther caught Elmer. Luther got down from the crate and they dragged him around to the front of the Church. They went in and laid him on the altar. Major put the white tablecloth from the altar over him. He wished he could put the cloth down and move his hands like a magician and have the body rise.

They walked back to the house. He didn't want to have to talk to Lucille or Luther or Marcus. He just wanted to pack and go. When they got back to the room, Luther took Marcus and they went home without looking at Major.

"We're leaving. As soon as I see his father we're leaving." He couldn't make eye contact with her. His voice was louder than the voice he usually used with her; it was like his preaching voice. He knew that the wind had carried his words in to her, and that she would be ashamed.

"We got to at least wait until he's buried. You have to tell everyone how much you like him." She was leaning over the table toward him shouting and crying. "How can we ever come back and see these people if you run? You got to stay and tell what you're here for — you got to be around for the living to make you worth him!"

"What could I say to make it clear? How could they accept me?" He still didn't want to cry in front of her, even though she had already seen everything he had to offer. He moved behind her to the dresser, to put his pants and shirt away. She turned around and looked at his face and kept crying. He was just bending down, loosening his boots.

"I heard everything, and tomorrow everyone else is going to hear it. You have to stay here and put it in your words. Tell them why this is going to be o.k. Tell me why this is going to be o.k."

He had nothing to say now. He could not imagine ever waking her up in the night again. How could he ever be on top again? "We can't stay here. They'll kill us."

"Goddamit Major! You started this. You told me your big dreams and I told you, No, go slow, but you did it anyway. Now, everyone knows us and you're going to change? We are not leaving this place!"

"It's too big for me now. I can't get anyone else killed. I have no choice now." He slumped into the bed, and she just sat there, looking at her hands.

In the morning, he got up and went to see Andrew Hill, the black undertaker, about getting the body out that morning. Andrew said he would, and he'd ask Reverend Garson to do the services if Major was sure that Lucille's sister was so sick that they'd have to leave that day. Major was sure.

Major went to the Anderson's farm to see Elmer's father. The old man was in the shop in the barn. He had his own blacksmith's tools, so he never had to pay Luther anything. Mr. Anderson was flattening shoes for the workhorses. Elmer had always done that and it took the old man twice as long to get the shoes back to being flat.

"Mr. Anderson, I can't say how sorry I am."

The old man didn't look up. He held the horseshoe over the coals until it was white. Then he pounded it with his mallet until it was black again. It was still bent.

"I know that you don't want to see me sir, but I want to say that I loved Elmer. I truly did. He was a fine young man." The words were hard to find. Anyone who had ever lost a son had heard the words Major spoke, but he couldn't think of anything new. The old man just turned around and heated the horseshoe again. Major watched him hold the shoe with the long tongs, and then turn it over and heat the other side. The old man's shirt was stuck to his back with sweat. He turned to the anvil and started to pound the hot shoe again.

"Mr. Anderson, I want you to understand that I'm sorry. There was nothing I could do then. If there's anything you need, please tell me." He wanted the old man to say that he needed love and comfort so that Major could do something for him. He wanted the old man to say he needed to make peace with God so he could feel better.

"You done too much already." The old man looked up and met Major's eyes. His old eyes looked black and Major knew they could see through him. Major turned and walked out of the barn. He walked a mile to his house and on the way he went past the Collins farm. Mr. Collins had the biggest pig farm in the county. His two boys were in the field mending a fence when Major walked by. They both turned and faced the other way, never even giving Major the chance to say he was sorry.

When he got home, Lucille was done packing. She had fit everything they owned except the icebox and the bed and dresser in their two ragged suitcases that didn't match. She was wearing her cream-colored summer dress.

"I went to my cousin Angela's and got us a horse. You have to hitch up the wagon."

"Good. We won't have to ride the train." He didn't want to have to take the train now either. He knew that Howard Louis was the mail carrier on it and would have to know where they were going. He couldn't see any black faces today. He knew that to white people, black people's skin



made them as indistinguishable as the riders' white robes.  
But black people would see his face on the train and know.

They walked out of the house and hooked up the horse to the old cart that had been left behind in the shed by the old minister. They left, going west, to Mississippi. Major didn't even know that Elmer was still laying on the altar, waiting.

—Patrick Keenan

## Un Poema Para Ti

Otra hora esta pasando cerca de nosotros.  
Otra hora de nuestras vidas.  
Cuando siento aquí, pienso de la hora que pasase,  
Esperaba que habría podido estar conmigo.

Las horas que estábamos acostumbrados son como zafiros—  
preciosos y raros.  
Pero no me importa porque como la joya, sé que siempre  
estarás allí.

Siempre estaras allí para mí como yo a ti.  
Porque tenemos una unión fuerte, y nada más puede ayudar.

Otra hora está pasando cerca de nosotros.  
Otra hora de nuestras vidas.  
Cuando siento aquí, pienso de la hora que pasase,  
Esperaba que habría podido estar conmigo.  
La hora que pasó es una que nunca veremos otra vez.  
Pero la hora no me importa ahora tengo algo que siempre  
durará.

Un poema para ti.

—Michelle D. Owens

The weed  
OF  
Wisdom...



If it wasn't Coltrane  
returned to dust  
someone kicked  
into the air stomped  
someone conjured him  
from dust he came  
whispering to me in a dream  
last night,

Who was it  
sighing?  
" 'Soul Eyes,' don't forget  
your music  
don't surrender  
'Alabama'  
Came from too much sweat, tears, & breath  
to let it die like the Trane."

—Lisa Manning

Love renders us immortal, because even though we will  
be erased from the face of the earth, we will never be  
deleted from the hearts of the ones who have loved us.

—Natasha Labaze

## The Chimney Without a Fire

Upon the hearth, in the center of the wall, sits a marble fireplace between two golden lamps, staring at the wall across the room, as he waits eagerly for the cold winter season. On his mantelpiece, lays peacefully his dearly beloved silver vase that never parts from him. The heartbeat of the wooden clock above him reminds him constantly of winter's approach, while the copper fire irons leaning beside him miss the pleasant feeling of tending the fire. A thick cover of dust is scattered over its hearth, and impatience instead of wood burns within him.

On the wall adjacent to the fireplace stands a tall window. Through its clear glass shines the autumn sun. The sight of the falling leaves brings hope to the chimney. In one day he must say to himself, only in one day, the white snowflakes will start falling from the sky; and at that moment I will feel the warmth of the burning wood within me.

On the other side, his cheerful and melodious neighbor, the sparkling black harp-shaped piano fills the chimney's heart with happiness. It's black and white keys utter the most soothing sounds. The chimney rejoices but never ceases to feel the absence of the warm glowing fire.

—Natasha Labaze

## The Last Time

Frost on my tongue  
received from your icy kiss  
this is loneliness crystallized  
and I try to forget the pain.

—Anthony Snowden

## Blue Hearts Bleed

I miss your smile  
Smile that melts my heart  
like the sun rays melt the clear  
crystal ice cubes that misses  
the glass and falls into the sky  
blue tray  
Blue puddle—Blue tears,  
My heart is bleeding  
in the cold melting blue puddle.

—Natasha Labaze

## No Tears

Damn! I whispered as I sat by the window, watching the  
stars...they seem so peaceful...so content...and I wonder  
WHY...WHY, did it have to end...

Damn!!!

My arms ache to hold you, my lips need the passion yours  
possess...and my body waits...to be turned into a quiet  
storm...soft and wet...

I wish you were here...

The way we met was so much like a dream...a child's  
fantasy...my fantasy...so unreal...I would have done  
anything to make you stay...

You helped me to be me...you encouraged my artistic  
growth...you understood...and you needed me without  
my being consumed...you loved me openly, hungrily...

I responded...

But you left...as if there weren't any strings attached...I  
wanted to scream God damn you!...can't you see what you  
have done to me? Don't you feel?...NO...There aren't any  
strings there is a God damn rope! But my pride wouldn't let  
me...Instead I smiled as best I could and said I understood  
and I will always be there if you ever need a friend

No tears...

—Michelle Reid



## Too Late the Apology

All they seem to say is barely polite  
And the things she overhears  
are far too much for anyone to have to take.  
The love she feels is unrequited,  
But that's not really new—  
while she cries herself to sleep.  
Will she? Will she take her life tonight,  
in the cold and pale night?  
Or will her heart break against the  
dark, jagged places in her room?  
It's sad to say, but things have always been that way.  
Those people throw away empty hellos  
and she runs after every single one.  
Made a wish on every star, hoping it would come true.  
It's sad to say, but things will turn out this way—  
and she does.  
She takes her life tonight,  
in the shadow and in the light;  
in the blistering heat and in the cold rain,  
beyond the stars and beyond the pain.

—Linda Montero

## The Man

Who is that man?  
he can make  
me cry, sometimes  
Who is he  
who can pull my  
smile from under  
the frown?  
What is he to me  
that he can understand  
where others have failed?  
Is he part of me  
when at times  
our thoughts mesh?  
A stranger  
when we can't seem  
to figure each other out  
He is just the man  
in love with me.

—Avril

## Still Living and Still Life

Two friends  
once close, inseparable  
they could magically feel  
each other's thoughts.

now

an occasional glance or  
"hello"  
as they both go in separate directions  
don't you see  
time was the enemy  
they grew up

—Anthony Snowden

## Boy Next Door

He was different  
the hooded eyes  
shaded a sadness  
only few could see

He ran away  
in order to live  
he had to  
some understood  
some wondered aloud  
why such a young boy  
had to go so far away  
to be a  
man.

—Anthony Snowden

## A Little Black Girl

When I was little that meant having wool like hair that had to be combed out and greased every morning as the tears flowed from my eyes.

When I was little that meant spending my days in the classroom petting my friend's long silky hair.

When I was little that meant constantly hearing a white girl nag me about the Crisco oil she said I put in my hair.

When I was little that meant having teachers ignore me in a classroom full of "adorable" white children.

But as life has flown by, I've slowly started to bloom into the beautiful black girl within all of us.

Yes, I am proud to be a black woman.

I couldn't have asked for a better gift from God.

Yes, I do know this society doesn't see me as a pretty flower.

I do know that my flower's petals are slowly being blown away by a cold wind of racism and sexism.

But, my roots are multiplying and soon a strong flower will bloom from my black soul.

—Natasha Labaze



C.E. Smith

## The Hands of the Poor

*"... the one-half of the world knoweth not how the other half liveth."* Francois Rabelais

When I was nine, my mother decided that our whole family should spend Christmas vacation in Haiti. Christmas on a hot island was unimaginable. I remember asking my mother, "but where will Santa Claus come down from? There are no chimneys over there! There is no snow either!" I began to cry. My mother, trying to comfort me said, "You'll see, you'll have the best Christmas you've ever had. Haiti is the most beautiful island during Christmas." I had no choice. Off we went to Haiti on December the eighteenth.

When I arrived I was quite blinded by the beauty of the island. Green mountains, pink flowers, a blue sky, and the bright sun! It looked like paradise! However, my eyes were soon drawn back to reality. I heard voices of what seemed to be a thousand people around me, begging to help carry baggage. I asked my mother, "Why do these people want to carry our bags so badly?"

She answered, "because they are nice."

My mother's reply was unconvincing. The sorrow and pain in the people's voices made me suspicious.

Suddenly, I felt somebody poke me. When I turned around I saw a boy in rags. "Do you have any bags I can carry?" he asked.

"No," I answered. "My mother went to get our bags."

He stood there waiting. I asked him why he wanted to bother himself with heavy bags. He looked down at his bare feet, and said as he lifted his eyes moist with tears, "I'm hungry and thirsty. I need to eat."

"Don't you have a home?"

"No," he answered.

Next thing I knew, I was reaching down into my purse for some money. I found a penny. I was about to put the small coin back, when the boy grasped my hand.

"What's wrong?" I asked, surprised. I was looking for a dollar bill.

"Please give me this penny," he said. "It can help me buy food."

I couldn't believe a penny would suffice, and I handed him a dollar. He smiled and said, "Merci, pitit tam."

His joy became clear when my mother explained to me that a penny was worth five cents and a dollar was worth "five gourdes."

Although I had helped someone by giving, my Christmas spirit had completely disappeared. I could not understand why. Driving to my aunt's house, I saw the palm trees swaying in the wind and women sitting by them with crying babies at their feet. "Why didn't their mothers just give them bottles?" I thought.

On Christmas Eve, following the biggest meal I had ever had, my cousin and I went to midnight Mass in our prettiest dresses. There may not have been snow, but there were millions of silver stars in the deep velvety blue sky. Again, I had reached paradise. But when I arrived in front of the church and saw the poor women and men sitting or lying on the steps, my heart sank.

People passed them by as if they were invisible. I blindly followed my family, trying to shut my eyes, but my ears were still open to their cries of despair. Sitting in Mass, I looked at Christ's crib and asked God, in my prayers, to give food to the needy. When collection-time came, people opened their purses, throwing silver coins and dollar bills into a basket. I wanted to grab the basket, rush out, and pour the money into the frail hands of the poor. The poor sat in misery with empty hearts and stomachs. Why didn't God help them, or better yet, why didn't He just send Santa Claus to feed the needy? Then I remembered, there are no chimneys to slide down in Haiti. There were only shining stars to vainly wish upon.

A couple of days later, as I walked down Fifth Avenue in New York, I dropped a penny. I was about to keep walking, when suddenly I heard the voices of the hungry. I bent down to pick up the penny. I have saved all pennies since. One day I plan to return to Haiti to pour them into the hands of the poor.

—Natasha Labaze



R.I.P.  
Freedom, Justice  
Equality...

Michelle...



