To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting a thesis/dissertation written by George Conley, Jr. entitled “To Make a Poet Black Then Bid Him Sing.” I have examined the electronic copy of this thesis and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in English.

Earl S. Braggs, M.F. A., Chairperson

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Richard P Jackson, Ph.D.

Sybil Baker, M.A., M.F.A.

Accepted for the Graduate Council:

______________________________
Stephanie Bellar,
Interim Dean of The Graduate School
“To make a poet Black then bid him sing”

A Thesis Presented for
the Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Chattanooga

George Conley, Jr.
May 2010
Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my loving wife, Anita Polk-Conley, for her undying support and devotion. She stood by me throughout this project. Without her love and belief in me, I surely would not be here today.
Acknowledgements

I would be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge the tremendous impact classroom instruction and workshops have had in shaping, not only my writing but, my desire and passion for the art. My professors, namely, Earl Braggs, Rick Jackson, and Sybil Baker equally shared their intensity for writing poetry and fiction. They also shared tried and proven techniques that separate a good writer from an average one and a great writer from a good one. Jackson’s determination to teach the necessity of the arc found in all great poems will forever stay in the forefront of my mind when creating my own work. Braggs taught me the power of words and to rely on the language, to trust the language to do what it is intended to do. The arc and attention to language have proven to be essential and will certainly be represented within my poetry.
Abstract

My thesis is comprised of a collection of 35 poems, new and revised, and it will include an introduction that traces the evolution of my writing starting from early influences through my term in the UT Chattanooga graduate program. This abstract is meant to provide a context for the creative process involved in the making of the poems and to suggest some of the background reading that has and will go into the project. The title of this thesis, “To make a poet Black then bid him sing,” comes from the Harlem Renaissance poet Countee Cullen’s, “Yet do I Marvel,” a poem that questions God’s intentions in placing a curse on a man, then requiring him to sing. This to me was a dichotomy that seemed to underpin my own work as it was developing. There are three sources that have influenced my poems: The Traditional Black Aesthetic, International poetry and poetics, and contemporary American poetry and poetics. As my own work has developed I have synthesized these influences in my own individual way. For example, my own poem “Thinking of Blackness,” among other poems has been influenced by what I call the Traditional Black Aesthetic, which includes poets from the Harlem Renaissance as well as Tennessee born poets whose afro-centric themes, free verse and political relevance found space in my poems such as “This Old Tree,” “Homeless Poem” and “Swimming the Mississippi.” These poems are among the collection included in this thesis project.
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Black Poet, White Critic

A critic advises
not to write on controversial subjects
like freedom or murder,
but to treat universal themes
and timeless symbols
like the white unicorn.

A white unicorn?

Dudley Randall

This is a journey that will take many paths. It will at times travel back to a past
that sometimes changes, then to a future that is clear and hopeful one day then dark and
murky another. It is a journey of self discovery, and it will end here for now in the
writing of this thesis.

There will be forks in the road. There will be dead-ends. There will be hills to
climb, rivers to cross, foreign lands to navigate. There will be identity crisis, family
conflicts, marriage and divorce, near death experiences and moments of elation, but more
importantly, there will many hours of studying and reading and writing poetry.

This thesis includes samples that represent the body of my work and will examine
the many influences on my own personal style. What makes a poet unique is his ability to
transform experience, ideas and imagination into the art form we call poetry. Since there
is undoubtedly no new knowledge that I bring to my work, there are certainly fresh and
creative ways of expressing what I believe every poem is written about: love, loss of
love, an epiphany or discovery and politics. My poems will fall under many, if not all of
the above categories.
The graduate committee has asked me to write about the major influences on my writing since entering the graduate program. On the surface this request seemed simple enough: identify those writers, teachers, muses and perhaps personal experiences, mix them altogether and presto, a poet is born. Obviously, nothing worth studying is quite that simple. The more I pondered the question of influence, the more complex and difficult it became. For example, how could I not credit Shakespeare for being a major influence? It occurred to me that numerous writings whether prose or poetry, fiction or non-fiction, probably had some impact on my creative process. A lifetime of experience certainly should play a significant, if not the most important, influence on me as a person and thus my work.

At this point, the process moved to narrowing down the writers who stood out the most. This too, was more difficult than I first imagined. The list was simply too long and varied to say writers x, y and z equal my major influences. Additionally, trying to narrow down a lifetime of experiences was even more daunting. Therefore, I decided to focus my efforts on two movements: (1) Those poets that drew me into writing poems in the first place, the Harlem Renaissance and (2) Those poets I studied, admired and emulated in the last two years as a graduate student in my current program, the Contemporary Poets.

Amazingly, the two movements have much in common, although over fifty years separate their beginnings. They both involve the same general components, including an aesthetic that cannot be denied. Their themes, structure and passion regarding African American poets that write about what we call today “The Black Aesthetic” is something that comes from within and therefore cannot be deduced. The first group essentially emerged from the Harlem Renaissance, and the second comes from a group of
contemporary African American writers known as Affrilatchian poets. Affrilatchian poets predominantly write about the unique experience of black life in Southern American society. Their poetry has a regional flavor full of the descriptions of inequalities and the emotions they often provoked. Their poems are often driven with rich images frequently associated with the south: the landscape, the food, the culture, and its colorful people. Their poetry delves into the complexities and contradictions of black life in the Deep South. Much of my poetry, perhaps, can best be defined as an invention, an invention shaped from my exposure to these two groups. My poems and my experiences rest comfortably in this new school of thought. However, the number of new poets in this group is small but is slowly merging forces with other contemporary poets from a slightly older generation.

I found many of these poets during an independent study supervised by Professor Earl Braggs during the summer of 2008, in a single anthology titled *Black Poets Lean South*. This is an impressive collection of new emerging poets uniting with well established names like, Sonia Sanchez, Cornelius Eady, and Yusef Komunyakaa. This collection immediately captured my attention and introduced me to a group of young poets not unlike myself with whom I quickly identified and from whom I gained new confidence in my own writing. Many of these poets fit into the aforementioned Affrilatchian set, a regional black aesthetic, if you will, where race, class, politics and family and other themes are examined with fresh eyes and colorful language. I have taken a critical look at some of these poets. One cannot help but notice the kinship among the new and the early black aesthetic forerunners. I have learned through my reading, that one cannot read a poem objectively because it is not an object and neither is the reader.
It is the aesthetic that draws us in and allows the reader to experience, perhaps vicariously, a black experience. This is, in a word, what I expect to master in my own writing. Below, I will discuss a number of poems found in the aforementioned anthology, starting with “Fish,” by Traci Dant, and how they have helped shape my style and approach to writing.

Black Poets Lean South
A critical analysis of eight poems:

“Fish”

Traci Dant uses simple yet effective language to tell her sad and regretful story about oppression in the Deep South. “Floral housedresses and … straw hats” paint a colorful picture of domestics spending their weekend fishing for dinner to be shared undoubtedly by hungry men folk, while at the same time disciplining nearby children by “putting the evil eye on any child bold enough to throw rocks in good water.” Good water suggests a peaceful time albeit rare. Although this poem is about white people and how they treat local blacks, white people are never mentioned in the poem, but it is clear that the “other folk’s” mentioned in the last stanza refers to white folks. Language in the South is often coded to communicate messages of discontent without sounding rebellious. The last stanza in “Fish” is powerful, yet, to the untrained ear it may sound somewhat subtle. There is an implicit emotional state of mind associated with “…lived all week in other folks kitchens,” opposed to, “worked” all week. Her choice of words, though seemingly passive, makes all the difference in the statement made in this poem.

They had lived all week

in other folk’s kitchens
with their souls tied
behind their backs.

The power in this ending is achieved simply by using the word “souls” where the word apron might go. To require one to tie one’s soul behind one’s back is an unforgivable act.

My grandmother, who lived in my family house when I was a child, wore an apron everyday as though it was part of a uniform. This poem jolted me back to a past I had long forgotten. It stimulated fresh images of my childhood and memories of my parents’ quiet displeasure of that time and space. The period, early 1960’s, Chattanooga, Tennessee, when the Deep South was still segregated and many women I grew-up around were domestic workers. In retrospect, these early experiences probably sparked the passion I now have for recording my life’s story through poetry.

If Traci Dant’s piece allowed me to return to my childhood, Cornelius Eady’s piece gave me a sense of clarity and assurance that no subject is off limits in writing poetry. Even the seemingly innocent television show, “The Little Rascals,” Eady shows, may have left an indelible mark on the mind of an emerging thinker. In other words, by reading Eady’s poem, I am reminded that our society is full of hidden and subliminal messages that might provide good material for exploring complex issues in everyday life. Eady’s creative use of language, transposing word for world, for example, gives me creative license to use this technique in my own poetry.

“Buckwheat’s Lament”

Buckwheat’s Lament

My family tells me this white gang I run with will
Grow up, and leave me behind. Our bones
Will change, and so will their affection. I will
Be a childlike man who lives in a shack. Just
Wait, they promise, my hair will become
Hoo-doo. The white girls will deny how we rassled,
What we saw. They laugh

Wait ‘til you’re grown. And I hear this sad place
At the middle of that word where they live,
Where they wait for my skin to go sour.

This satirical piece about the beloved fictional TV character (Buckwheat) is as sad as it is funny. Cornelius Eady uses his vivid imagination and timely humor to relate a fictional dilemma to a real life conundrum. White people in the South can love little black children who pose no threat but when the children grow-up their affection turns into fear and hate. “I will be a childlike man who lives in a shack,” is a telling line about the reality of black men who are denied opportunity and called boy their entire lives.

The point of view is interesting in this poem. The innocent Buckwheat who cannot see the world he lives in is not a world but, a word, racism. Eady does not say the word but, we all know the word. Like most Southern men, I received the same advice from my family as Buckwheat, and they were right. My bones did change, they did live in that word and they thought my skin did go sour. Eady cleverly uses “skin” as a metaphor for the way people view race in America. It is also smart to suggest that Buckwheat’s problem is really a societal problem.

“Storm Named Earl”

This poem, written in couplets builds up like the storm it describes and delivers the damage one might expect when things get out of hand. Earl Braggs starts the poem with a specific geographical place and a bit of history about that place. Not only do we
learn something about Wilmington, North Carolina, but we learn something about a boy who grew-up there and the citizens with whom he coexisted.

The language in the poem is explicit and hints this place has bigger problems than the weather. If the storm is a metaphor for racism, it is very effective; “…angry air pounded, dirty sheets of white notebook paper and fear laden faces” are great images associated with fear and racism. As the storm builds, so do the racial overtones and the divisions among the rich and poor residents. Race and class become ever present in this poem and its universal theme is heard loud and clear.

Earl Braggs’ ability to take a local experience and give it universal appeal is only part of what makes this poem great. He catches the reader by surprise with an eloquent clarification to such a dreadful set of circumstances. His subtle move toward confronting the racist newspaper, bus drivers, restaurant owners and even the storm as gods, spelled with a little “g” is ingenious. This poem ends like all storms end, with a sense of calm and hope for tomorrow.

The following poem by Truth Thomas serves as a wonderful example of how to use free verse and coded language to tell a horrifying tale full of emotions and scares from an unforgettable past. I study this poem often to practice the craft of writing with detachment yet expressing deep personal pain.

“Harriet Tubman’s Email 2 Master”

Harriet Tubman’s Email 2 Master
   (Subject: directions to the new place)

   go

   down past glass
ground in your salt shaker

make a right
between
arsenic sweet tea swallows

I am easy to find.
just take the fork where

mothers kill their babies
to keep them safe from you

and
look for
windows growing shotguns

Technology plus history divided by imagination equals runaway slave with a
computer and an avant-garde poem. This poem serves as an example of how one can do
anything with the right tools. Poetry has no limits. Words have the power to enter into
worlds no man has gone before. One can travel to the past and future simultaneously.
Truth Thomas has a score to settle with the anger and bitterness inherited by all those
who are descendants from slaves. He is successful in this poem. His passion jumps from
the page and dances with the Gods of revenge and rage, and somehow it settles the soul.

The poem also works on a structural level. The title sets the poem up nicely. And
then it takes the reader down a path with new discoveries with each clearly written line.
Truth writes a deceptively simple poem that takes the reader into the complex mind of the
speaker. The last line, “windows growing shotguns,” is both beautifully written and haunting in his coded language.

The creative use of language, i.e., wordplay, coded messages and irony found in the next poem by Harryette Mullen, and as many of the poets reviewed here, has had a great impact on my personal style. I have studied their keen observation talent, skillful word play and verbal dexterity, and tried to be mindful of these skills when writing my own poetry, as in Mullen’s “We Are Not Responsible.”

“We Are Not Responsible”

Harryette Mullen writes a narrative poem that questions the basic rights and freedoms of citizens. Although the poem does not directly state it, the injustices were aimed at Black Americans or any minority race for that matter, the implications are strong based upon the history and treatment of Blacks as second class citizens. The language in the poem is heavy with sarcasm and shows a total disregard for anyone who dares question authority.

“We Are Not Responsible” makes a bold statement regarding the lack of responsibility held by those in positions of authority. It is written in a matter-of-fact style and is absent of any semblance of human compassion. This poem reads like a bad customer service policy one might see at an airport, bus, or train station.

The first line in the poem, “We are not responsible for your lost or stolen relatives,” clearly points to the atrocities blacks endured during slavery. The poem continues in this vein to explore issues facing minorities in present day society. The following line is a clear example, “It is not our fault you were born wearing a gang
color.” This poem is another fine example of how black poets have challenged the oppressive American society.

An exercise my professors have used which has proved to help my focus and concentration in my writing can be found in the next poem by Lita Hooper. The exercise involves studying a painting or photograph, then writing a poem about the experience. Hooper does this with great success in her poem, “Photo of My Mother.”

“Photo of My Mother”
It is said a picture is worth a thousand words. Lita Hooper writes a poem inspired by a photo of her mother, her poem allows me to see the photo, and the opposite effect apparently is true. Her words draw images that are worth a thousand pictures. Moreover, her poem achieves sound. One can just hear Sam Cook crooning and her mother’s fingers snapping to the groove.

The detail in this poem suggests a keen observer in the poet. The poem flows naturally and her use of southern vernacular seems genuine. “One who puts her foot in some greens,” is a line I heard growing up and brought back fond memories of my childhood. This phrase is used to complement the cook. It is truly southern. I know the woman in the photo, and I like her.

“A Twice Named Family”
Traci Dant nailed this poem regarding the duel role African Americans have to play in American society. The poem is about prejudice as much as it is about family. The language is simple, direct, and clear. She is pulling from the wisdom of her ancestors who knew enough about racism to prepare her family for the inevitable. The poem itself takes
on a dual role. While it is making a statement about the strength of her family, it is also
making a statement about the weakness of a prevailing society. The poem ends with a
strong testimonial; “Somebody way back knew we needed names to be loved in.” She is
referring to the names used at home around family but not at work.

“Harlem Cats,”
(Vintage 1940s)

“Harlem Cats” is truly a vintage poem in that it celebrates the origins of the
aesthetic and style labeled “cool” in the 1940s, and still enjoyed today. It is the manner
“cool brothers” carried themselves, the way they walked, the way they talked. This poem
actually walks using short steady lines (steps) to communicate its message. Carrie Allen
McCray creates a scene one can easily visualize.

I saw two young men,
real cool
briskly dip-
walking,
One North,
One South…

This poem should be noted for the simple observation of the nuances of how
people communicate and the significance it has on the larger society. Minimizing one’s
speech was not done in brevity to save time; instead it was done to code the language to
keep onlookers unaware. I sometimes talk this way, and I sometimes write this way. I
love this poem.

Man
Yeah
Dig
Later
Spikey’s
In only five words, two men greeted each other, acknowledged they were both doing well, exchanged salutations, and agreed on a place to meet later. They did all of this without breaking stride. McCray, too, was able to communicate volumes using very few words. He chose words and phrases to get the most mileage out of them. “Take briskly dip-walking,” for example. This short phrase suggests the two men walked as though they had somewhere to go or something to do, and they walked with a sense of pride and independence. The two men in the poem had no need to fill in the blanks in their conversation, and Carrie Allen McCray had no need to fill in a void in his poem.

As much as I would like to discuss the creative process involved in the writing of my poems, I can only take the conversation so far. In other words, I cannot fully express how my poems are written any more than any artist can explain the origin of his or her God-given talent. I think it would, frankly, be disingenuous to make that claim and further a waste of time to attempt this futile process. Notwithstanding, I can continue to trace the evolution of my background reading, and provide a context to how those readings coupled with my personal experiences may have contributed to the writer I have become.

There have been a number of international poets who have contributed to how I approach my writing. Although they may not write specifically on Black themes, they often share a commonality. Many of these poets have an uncanny resemblance to Black aesthetic writers in regards to their urgency and necessity to share the experience of living and writing under oppressive and stifling societies.

I will critique a few international poets, below, and show how they have expanded my thought process in my approach to writing. These poets tend to write using universal
themes and often transcend cultures and geographical boundaries. I often think about Blaga Dimitrova’s “Ars Poetica” when I sit down to address some of the ills in my own societal dispositions. The international poets taught me fear is something the writer most lose early in the practice of writing poetry. Fear can only limit the writer and stifle his writing. Fear of the reader, fear of criticism, fear of the unknown, all must be tossed from one’s thoughts if the craft of poetry is to be discovered.

“Ars Poetica”

This poem about poetry urges the poet to approach the work with all the passion, gravity and intensity one can muster. The message in the poem suggests that if one cannot meet the challenge, perhaps one should not write at all. I have taken this message to heart. The language in the poem is clear and direct and holds no punches. It cuts with razor like precision and will not accept any excuses for half-ass attempts.

Blaga Dimitrova follows her own advice as she instructs the would-be writer to “send each of your words like a last letter before execution.” She wastes no words or time making her case. The urgency is evident in each line; each charge is followed with a reason for the urgency. “You simply won’t have time to correct mistakes,” she writes. These next two poems send out a warning to poets not to take the work lightly, there is too much at stake. The world depends upon the honesty and sincerity of the poet.

Ars Poetica

Write each of your poems
as if it were your last.
In this century, saturated with strontium,
charged with terrorism,
lying with supersonic speed,
death comes with terrifying suddenness.
Send each of your words
like a last letter before execution,
a call carved on a prison wall.
You have no right to lie,
no right to play pretty little games.
You simply won’t have time
to correct your mistakes.
Write each of your poems,
tersely, mercilessly,
with blood—as if it were your last.

“Roller Coaster”

The slow climb, the tight curves, the fast drop, jerky stops and starts, all describe
a roller coaster ride. Nicanor Parra compares his poetry to an amusement park ride and
simultaneously takes a jab at poetry before his arrival on the scene. Is he serious? I don’t
think so. But, he is making a grave statement about his predecessors and contemporaries
for that matter. “…Poetry was the paradise of the solemn fool,” is undoubtedly a dark,
brooding, oversimplified perspective yet, it certainly has a kernel of truth. Parra is further
suggesting that his style of poetry is honest and genuine, steeped in reality, and thus it
should be preferred. He dares the reader to take his view. Parra warns, there will be
consequences, “I’m not responsible if you come down/with mouth and nose bleeding.”
Para’s poetry has a hard edge, dark humor, and a disregard for the pretentious, and he is
undiably proud of his convictions.

Roller Coaster

For half a century
Poetry was the paradise
Of the solemn fool.
Until I came
And built my roller coaster.
Go up, if you feel like it.
I’m not responsible if you come down
With your mouth and nose bleeding.

The next two collections reviewed like Dimitrova’s and Parra’s work do not represent the Harlem Renaissance or the Affrilatchian group. However they do have an international appeal as well as a strong footing steeped in the Black Aesthetic. I found these poems reaching beyond the regionalism of the earlier poets studied here. Sometimes one has to look beyond one’s own backyard to discover something new about one’s self. I found these works refreshing and worthy of deep consideration as poets to emulate in my writing.

A Review of Rita Dove’s Museum

I read this collection of poems the way I might visit a museum. The closer I studied the piece the more I saw. Rita Dove’s pieces were rich with texture and deeply personal. Whether she was writing a political poem, a love poem, or one of many poems about her father, she spoke with clarity revealing a deep intimate relationship with her subject.

She sometimes showed a light comical side which made this reading fun and delightful. “Why I Turned Vegetarian,” is one such piece. Here, she uses a human thumb as a metaphor for meat and suggests that the owner of the thumb may have bit it off by mistake. While this poem is fun and whimsical, it also makes a statement about how careless and greedy we are as human beings.
Rita dedicates a section of her book to her father, entitled, “My Father’s Telescope.” The title piece in this section appears on the surface to be a poem about a girl’s admiration for her father. But, closer observation reveals something dark and cynical, maybe even sexual abuse. Her use of the term telescope suggests to the reader to take a closer look to see her underlying message. Notice the following excerpt:

The oldest joke
in the world,
a chair on three legs.

The language is simple, clear and yet sarcastic. The joke referred to in the poem is not a joke but the awful truth about a man and his erection. Later in the poem she notes, “The chair shrinks.” She ends the poem with the word “telescope,” a phallic symbol that again, reminds the reader to take a closer observation. This creative use of language is found throughout the book often revealing powerful haunting images that are both telling and captivating.

Rita Dove is undoubtedly a classic contemporary poet that must be read by anyone who loves the language. While this review only highlights a few of her poems that struck me the most, every poem is met with the same vigor and compassion. She is well traveled and has a strong historical perspective; this too, is revealed in “Museum,” a book that must be read with a sharp eye for the message within the message.

Evie Shockley: a half-red sea
A Review:

Evie Shockley’s dreamlike poems in a half-red sea take a look at African American history and culture past and present, and she puts her unique blend of love/hate
commentary on the complex relationship between the country, its citizens and the artists who observed in this contradictory land of freedom.

Shockley imagines how great American poets, Gwendolyn Brooks and Phillis Wheatley among others, might have seen the world they left us and more importantly how the world did not see, or appreciate them. In “bio / autography (or, 18th century multiculturalism)” Shockley tells a compelling story that can only be understood fully when read from the page and not merely heard. Notice below her unique use of words, syntax and punctuation or lack there of, to create her own view of the poet (Phillis Wheatley) as well as invoke herself literally into the poem.

bio / autography
(or, 18th –century multiculturalism)

found in africa / dawnd in freedom
raised in boston / rose in slavery
schooled in greek / grew in god
published in england / died in poverty

for phillis wheatley

This small but complex poem was important in helping me understand how to read, “a half -red sea.” The poem is like a puzzle that must be taken apart then put back together to be truly appreciated. This is what Shockley does with culture and history. She takes it apart then puts it back together and forces the reader to see it thru her eyes. In the title of the above poem she takes the word autobiography, rearranges it and creates a new word, and thus a new meaning. Then she defines this new word as “18th –century multiculturalism,” since multiculturalism did not exist in the 1700s, she has changed
history to fit her artistic vision. Furthermore this poem is half romantic, half tragic, separated by slashes. Let’s read half the poem to the left of the slashes. “found in africa, raised in boston, schooled in greek, published in england,” very romantic. The other half of the poem, “dawned in freedom, rose in slavery, grew in god, died in poverty,” is very tragic.

This is what Shockley does in many of her poems in *a half-red sea*, which is a play on words. She tells two halves of a story creating yet a third story. She connects with her ancestry and her heritage and retells the story from her unique style and perspective. She evokes memories of Billie Holiday and Fredrick Douglass and others in the same way. Shockley further shows her unusual talent in her “a thousand words,” a poem that takes on a different meaning each time its read. This poem too is as visually dazzling as it is emotionally overwhelming. “a thousand words” is literally a thousand words, (I counted them) that takes the reader through every contradiction one can imagine. It starts with torture and ends with torture with a million emotions in between. This too, is an apt description of my reading of “a half-red sea.”

*Victims of The Latest Dance Craze, Cornelius Eady*
*A Review:*

Each poem in this book is a song written with the rhythm of jazz and the insight of a cultural icon. The culture of black people is shown with clarity using a multiplicity of events, situations and dynamics yet, with one underlying theme, the dance. The dance is what lovers do, it’s what church goers do, what gang members do, what the broken hearted do, what the police do, what victims do, what nature does. The dance is how we struggle, how we fall down and how we survive. It is how we live and how we die.
Cornelius Eady’s genius is revealed in his ability to tell a complicated story with a simple yet poignant metaphor.

Cornelius Eady’s imagination is original, vivid and compelling. His language is colorful, humorous, and emotional. His words excite, cut, and heal. I felt every emotion while reading this book. Sometimes I laughed and cried at the same time, a feat that can only be commanded by a true wordsmith.

In the poem, “Jazz Dancer,” Eady uses jazz elements (repetition) to cause the reader to question physics, biology, music and society all in one stanza. Notice below how he takes the reader on this fantastic journey.

I have a theory about motion.
I have a theory about the air.
I have a theory about main arteries and bass lines.
I have a theory about Friday night.
Just a theory, mind you,
About a dry mouth and certain kinds of thirst
And a once- a- month bulge of money
in a working pair of pants.

Eady flies from the heights about physics and safely lands in the pants of the working class using rhythm, repetition and imagination. In “The Woman Who Dances With God,” Eady puts forth theories about religion while keeping his commitment to the dance theme, again using unparalleled imagination. “She is on a date with God,” he writes, forcing the reader to view life thru the prism where dance is king.

While Eady’s poems are uplifting and hopeful, they carry with them a sting of reality. While they are often lofty and philosophical, they are simultaneously grounded
and down to earth. I would be remiss if I didn’t mention the first and title poem of Eady’s book. In the poem “Victims of the Latest Dance Craze,” Eady paints a picture of a world ruled by jazz, a world where men, women, young and old move to his unheard music. They intermingle love, work, and play on the canvass of his poetic language. The interplay is orchestrated by an observer who truly understands what moves people. Take note from the following excerpt where the fanciful and reality mix in Eady’s imaginary world.

Here is the world (what’s left of it),
In brilliant motion,
The oil slick at the curb
Danced into a thousand
Splintered steps.
The bag ladies toss off their
Garments
To reveal wings.

The above poem sets the stage for all the poems that follow, each poem telling an individual story in a world created by an observer moved by jazz. Cornelius Eady, a contemporary poet whose voice will certainly be heard for the ages.

I am reminded of advice given by two of my key professors, Dr. Jackson and Professor Braggs, who differ in many ways and are great poets in their own right, agree that the creative process cannot be explained, it has to be experienced. Another great contemporary poet, William Mathews advocates to students not to think so much about what to write but, to instead simply start writing. Once this is done, the creative process will kick-in and guide the piece where it needs to go. One can and should always return back to the piece for editing and revision. In fact Professors, Braggs and Jackson, also

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agree that the revision process is important, if not more, than the initial writing of a poem.

I have discussed the schools of poetry and individual poets that have had the most impact on my writing. Furthermore, I have discussed the impact of the academy and how the learning process has allowed me to sharpen my skills and create work worthy of a graduate thesis. In addition, it has shown me some of the common interest poet’s share which has allowed me to join the conversation artists are having in academic circles worldwide.

The Black Aesthetic, for example, has evolved into high art. Although its humble beginnings, starting with folklore during slavery written in black dialect, was not recognized by white critics as poetry at all. They did not recognize that it was impossible to eliminate an aesthetic they did not completely understand. But that did not stop the inevitable development of an art form that has become celebrated worldwide. I suppose the rest of the world had to catch-up. Nevertheless, the Harlem Renaissance was perhaps the peak of the Black Aesthetic, a period when Black artists demanded respect for their work and white critics were forced to share the ivory tower with these writers. This period had a significant impact on my identity as a person and as a poet.

Harlem Renaissance poet Ray Durem (1915-63) wrote, “I Know I’m Not Sufficiently Obscure,” which was his answer to white critics who did not recognize black poetry as art. The following excerpt serves as an inspiration for me to give my take on the black experience in American life.

I know I'm not sufficiently obscure

   to please the critics--nor devious enough.
Imagery escapes me.
I cannot find those mild and gracious words
to clothe the carnage.
Blood is blood and murder's murder.
What's a lavender word for lynch?

Durem, in this sarcastic yet poignant piece pokes fun at white critics who will not or cannot appreciate the black aesthetic. Therefore they could not understand why the black experience was so pervasive in the black poets work. The language is strong and clearly denotes disenchantment with white critics’ lack of recognition of the black writer as capable of such eloquence as they saw themselves. Durem’s poem also imbued a definite pride and legitimacy to the black poets’ point of view while simultaneously silencing white critics’ unjustifiable condemnation.

This sense of pride and legitimacy of the black perspective is echoed in Claude McKay’s poetry which often speaks to white critics and black readers. McKay (1890-1948) uses classic Shakespearean sonnet structure to express his consternation and frustration with the plight of the black poet and the unawareness of the white reader. Again his language is strong and unforgiving, sentiments that ironically reflect the white society he is writing about. Two selected poems by McKay, “If We Must Die,” and “The Negro Tragedy” cannot be clearer in their defiance toward the status quo and the Negro’s determination to stay the course.

**If We Must Die**
If we must die--let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die--oh, let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe;
Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

The Negro’s Tragedy
It is the Negro's tragedy I feel
Which binds me like a heavy iron chain,
It is the Negro's wounds I want to heal
Because I know the keenness of his pain.
Only a thorn-crowned Negro and no white
Can penetrate into the Negro's ken,
Or feel the thickness of the shroud of night
Which hides and buries him from other men.
So what I write is urged out of my blood.
There is not a white man who could write my book,
Though many think their story should be told
Of what the Negro people ought to brook.
Our statement roam the world to set things right.
This Negro laughs and prays to God for Light!
Of all the poets discussed in this paper, Langston Hughes remains the single poet that I relate to more than any other. It was Hughes who captured my attention at an early age and inspired me to plunge into the deep sea of reading and writing poetry. Seas that I still swim in today, its warm waters soothe my increasing desire to express myself through poetry. If it was Hughes that got me started in poetry, it is Hughes that has taken me to this point where my life as a poet truly begins. The following excerpt from Langston Hughes’ “Theme for English B” expresses the counter-intuitive process as it relates to the student teacher relationship that sometimes transcends one’s sources and creates poetry that exists on a higher plain.

So will my page be colored that I write?
Being me, it will not be white
But it will be
a part of you, instructor
You are white---
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you
That’s American

Obviously every person is not a poet but, every poet is a person. It is sometimes difficult for me to separate myself from my work. In fact, they are so intertwined they are impossible to separate; therefore, every poem is somehow a part of me. Although, it may not be about me, as it were, it is certainly about some faction of the world through the prism of my creative process which I will probably never fully understand. I suppose it is a concoction of experience, exposure, intention, and magic. The magic occurs when I
trust the language enough to take me to places unknown or not yet perceived. It is a hunger that every poet has toward aesthetic excellence.
Poems by George Conley, Jr.

Councilman Indicted

She will read the headline
like a death sentence.
She will burn the newspaper
in the fireplace and hope
this is a dream.

She will eat pills for breakfast
and drink wine for lunch.
She will become unfamiliar in her own house
and piss on the kitchen floor.

She will not sleep for days,
watch tv on a blank white
screen.
She will drive to the courthouse
in her blue housecoat and pink slippers.

She will be cold.
She will smell like
alcohol, urine and
baby powder.

She will go home with
men in white jackets
and white teeth.

She will be smiling.
Homeless poem (revised)

This poem will hop a train, ride the smooth rails of injustice while riders peer out the window admiring colors on trees once perfect for lynching.

It will sit next to paying customers, pretty colorless girls in blue bonnets and ivory clean boys with extremely white teeth. They look so civilized in their black shoes shined by my grandfather.

I catch these lines like baseballs find familiar mitts. Southern sun squinting eyes, ears hearing ghosts hollering from railroad tracks behind the baseball field.

History leaning on me, I feel the weight of words lifted from my aching back. I throw them back to eager ears on white paper.

Sweat rolling down my face like barbeque sauce, licking my lips, thinking of a fresh pot of collard dreams.

I’ll sleep tonight in left field and wait for the Sheriff to take me home by the bottom of the fifth.

I’ll wake-up in a Birmingham jail, write a letter to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I’ll tell him true stories about Lookout Mountain, Tennessee and future Black Presidents.
Swimming the Mississippi.

Making my way across this muddy river
Silt and seaweed clogging my ears, my eyes
Tightly closed sensing trouble ahead,
Head unprotected, bump into rocks and debris

One time I knocked myself out
Blackout
Blindly navigating subterranean worlds
Finding the edge of life for comfort
The water falling into a deep, dark, warm pool where
Dreams are told, life ignored
False arrests, regrettable divorce, suicidal thoughts
Float by like driftwood
Jagged rocks pointing to reckless skies
Reflecting a calm summer day
War Games.

Like a map, I unfold you
slowly, carefully discovering
landmines in your danger zones.
I am searching for a small
village in a valley
near Tuscany.

The earth is temporarily still,
only faint sounds.
Soldiers marching in the distance.
I focus on my subject.

Torturing you with fingertip instinct,
tickling you until you sob
then decant wine like a terrorist
pouring gasoline
over your unwilling body.

Leaving you tied to the posts
and your thoughts and my whims,
you struggle through your gag,
arch your back and grunt
a low long moan.

But I’m not finished,
searching for WMD’s
between your legs
I discover the one item
on the menu I’m looking for.

Right before I push the button,
I turn my thoughts to the bombs
exploding down the hallway.
The sirens screaming outside the window,
foot soldiers marching closer on rough terrain.

I return to the cocktail of salt and sweet wine
and something bitter and delicious,
drinking every drop of you.
I tease you by whispering
“the war is over”
When I was a bartender

There is a place I use to go and sit and drink.
I use to work there, and sit and drink and talk.

People came to see me, they showed me naked pictures of girlfriends, freshly cut tattoos, scars from bar fights. They talked about trips to Mississippi and Paris and Las Vegas whorehouses.

I listened with my eyes and sat and talked and worked and shared my pain.

We laughed until we cried, then lied about orgies in Brazil and Thai stick and opium and dog meat. We sat and talked and smoked stories about Indian spirits and drank tales of Buddhist Priests and Black Panthers and dead parents. Baaba Maal screamed in Singhalese, we pretended to understand the words and danced and sang with southern accents. We exchanged jailhouse experiences and miraculous getaways and exotic cigarettes.

I broke up fights, mended relationships and called the police and taxi cabs.

Divorce found me there, sitting and talking and laughing.
Ghetto Beaches

If we were lovers in a war-torn city
I would burn my driver’s license
And break all my clocks
I would sleep late everyday and dream
I would dream of ghetto beaches
Black sand between my toes
Plotting to rob my feet of this temporary pleasure
I would measure the sun’s warmth with eyelids
And dream
Dream of land not owned
And shores unmanned and trees set free
If we were lovers in a war-torn city
I would not bathe after we made love
And tell you stories of fresh air and clean water
I would erase everything on my mind
Then try to remember that the mind does not leave footprints on ghetto beaches
I would reinvent myself and you
I would rewrite history starting in 1776
I would go swimming everyday on a ghetto beach
And try to reach the other side
I would let the tide wash me to the shore
A free man I would stand
Naked before you
I would tell you lies about peace and love
If we were lovers in a war-torn city
I would take a one way trip to the ocean
Until finally the taste of salt clogs my nostrils and ears
And all of my fears drown away
Speaking of Blackness

My Grandmother spoke of blackness with white overtones. She remembered what was not known, like my great white Grandfather. Not great, not white, Related to some Indians somewhere where the natives born brown loved and made love to Africans and others.

She closed her eyes, folded her hands and said “baa-by.” “Baby birds don’t ask their mothers how to fly. The butterfly cannot deny her caterpillar past. They’re related, to each other they survive. They the same.”
This old Tree

This tree will forget my insignificant life,
my petty sorrows, birthdays and barbeques.
But it will never forget Sam Jones,
a man who wandered too far from his neighborhood
on the backside of town,
Onto this street with white dogwoods and white oaks
and white people.

One day the white folks decided to invite Sam to a barbeque
and make him guest of honor.
They slipped a rope around his neck,
Now he stays in the oak tree’s memory,
providing shade to a black hound dog
on this dreadful spring day.

The trunk twisted, frowning at neighboring trees.
The limbs seeming to grow twigs in the shape of
middle fingers,
Waving in the silent breeze
echoing Sam’s agonizing pain.
Elegy

To those brothers who came before me
huddled in bunches like
football huddles on street corners.
Ronald Staples rolled the dice
from southern hick towns to New York
with great success
until he fumbled, dropped the ball,
didn’t wear a condom.

Dangerous business in 1980,
Ron loved to live dangerously.
Volunteered for Viet Nam,
poked needles in veins,
fucked virgins, both boys
and girls.
Told the devil to kiss his ass

You can see him from an airplane
window like that witch in Wizard of Oz,
 flying below the radar
 with his broom between his legs,
 laughing.

This is the spirit the mundane
wished they had.
To fly without fear
of landing safely
on dangerous ground.
Gods Face

Cracked mirror images reflect shards of God’s torn face.
Imaginary scares cut deep through the bone to the soul.
The internal bleeding will not stop.
Childhood memories of baseball games that never happened
Replace reality’s never ending nightmare.

Hope has become a daydream.

Words like love and happiness
Are merely lyrics to forgotten songs.
Children are no longer children.
Playgrounds are now gathering spaces for drug addicts
And sexual predators.

Catholic priests are public enemy number one.
While their victims continue their legacy via the internet.
Female teachers’ run off with adolescent schoolboys
As mother drowns her twin baby girls in the bathtub.

Father is a rolling stone, he studies rocks.
The police must be amateur geologists.
I don’t think he’ll be home soon.
Arrested for back child support and simple possession.

Black men are rapidly becoming extinct.
Somebody said Jesus was a black man.
They crucified him.
I wonder if God is angry..

It pisses me off.

I see God’s face when I look into the mirror.
I saw God’s face when my baby girl was born.
I see God’s face in a crescent moon, a blade of grass, an orange sky.

God may not be pissed
But he surely has a frown on his face.
Lover’s Eyes

There wasn’t anything else I could do
I tried to lie my way to truth
Like a man in women’s clothes
This lie will lose its legs
Eventually one has to disrobe
She died in my arms whispering softly
I hate you
Me too
I thought as I tightened my caress
To strong to embrace someone you love
I hate me too
Trying to learn to love
To hate my lies

There wasn’t anything else I could do

Now around her throat I found my hands
Staring deeply into her eyes
Seeing every lie I ever told
Flashing before my damned eyes
Every indiscretion ever made
Every time I cheated
On her, I cheated
On myself
My lies, mirrored in her eyes
She died uncovering the truth about me
I didn’t want to kill her
I had to, I loved her

There wasn’t anything else I could do
Paper or Plastic

A boy ignoring his mother notices you
Crying with no tears in the grocery store line
Oreo’s, kipper snacks, beer and toilet paper
Bagged to provide some relief from
Retail store music

His cap gun aimed at the cashier
She flashes a plastic smile, “paper?”
“Stick-em up, the boy cries with clinched teeth
You wonder how long before he becomes a cop

Your items parade in single file past the scanner
Sugar, caffeine, nicotine and tobacco
You start to bleed while standing there
Backing your way out of line
They curse you under breath

You curse them back with mental middle fingers
Your brand of napkins is missing
“Kotex, we need Kotex maxi’s on aisle six”
The store intercom interrupts Barry Manilow

“I write the songs that make the whole world sing”
You sing aloud as push your way past Mr. & Mrs. Charmin
Still waiting for their grocery bags for trash
The girl behind the register connects her eyes with yours
“Anything else sweetie,” “yea, got any plane tickets back there?”

“I feel ya girl, Jamaica would be nice, paper or plastic?”

“Plastic”
People fly

When artist get together
The world changes
Borders become undone
Boundaries expand
New colors are made
Particles of light merge
And explode and reconfigure
Into the minds and souls
Of those who make art
Alive they are
The pads of pain
Canvass of passion
Clays loving fingers
Artists rising suns on
Photographs
Lovers finding reasons
To love in songs
Writers finding truth
In stories untold yet
Seers playing fantasies on
Guitar strings

The we here is you

When you get together
Time stops momentarily
You grow wings and fly
You live and die and live again
The Phoenix was born by you
The Sphinx too

Gladys and her black hair
That paints your pale body
The cry no one heard at midnight
The death of hope
And her rebirth
Were born by you

When artists get together
People look and listen
And learn and cry and laugh
And fly

People fly when artists get together
Planes, Trains, Automobiles

This poem will travel
walking out the front
door, down 10th street
to the homeless shelter
fall in the pissy lap
of a would be phd.
just blocks from
university pseudo
intellectuals flying
to Europe with the Streetman’s
life told in clean notebooks
with no mention of police
brutality and Christian
apathy to a stage in Prague.
They will speak of
wineo’s and cracked
heads with little
authority and no
knowledge of anything
real or created or invented
weak lies retold to believers
of anything and nothing.
Nothing comes easily to
those with everything and
nothing to show for it.

This poem will hop a
train and ride the smooth
rails of injustice while
riders will peer out
the window and admire
colors on trees once
perfect for lynching.
It will sit next to
pretty white girls in
blue bonnets and
ivory clean boys
with extremely white
teeth, they look so
civilized in their black
shoes shined by my
grandfather.
Red Curtains

Grandmamma would buy red curtains
for complete darkness in the daytime
and sneak a glass of red wine.
Fine.
She was real fine.

Velvet drapes cannot be penetrated
by the all powerful light.
Sight is restricted to those on the outside,
while red has made the room black.

Silk sheers dancing on a window breeze
tinting reds unknown yet.
Negligee moistens and lovers admire a red moon.
Soon the color will put them to sleep.

Dreams in black and white and red
will play the day’s songs on mental stages.
And the rages will subside.
Letter to my Son

I delivered you
to this beautiful
awful world.

When you were little
I called your name,
you came.

I taught you things,
taught you well,
you learned.

We played
together, you and I.
You fell, cut your knee
tasted our blood
you cried.

I cried last night
thinking of you.
I called you,
you did not come.

I taught you to love,
to sing, to see
the stars.

You wanted to be Michael Jordan.
I told you, you could.
You didn’t believe me,
I cried.

I taught you to love
yourself, to grow, to dream,
to be a man.

You grew farther and farther
away from me.
You learned secrets and lies
and games played
on the street.

I guess you learned
to be a man.
Where are you my son?
I miss you,
you cannot hear me.

You’re too far away,
learning to mix chemicals
in your laboratory.
Studying the latest techniques
in hydroponics.

Learning to play video life
and death.
I stare through my window
waiting to see you drive up
in your sister’s car.

I saw a friend of yours
yesterday at the grocery store.
I was buying peaches
to make you a cobbler.

He said he heard
you were going to
Spain to run with the bulls.
I cried and bought apples
instead.

I slept in your bed
last night.
I dreamed
you were running
from the police.

I tried to save you,
I jumped on my bike
I could not catch you.
You got away.

I lied to the judge
I said you were out
of the country
in Spain
running with the bulls.
I woke this morning
I did not cry.
Looking at your big
empty shoes
made me smile.
This Time

She dances with no shoes
no feet, no music.
She dances with her eyes only
and time,

which seems to be always?
running out.

This time ours has stopped.
Our making love without touching
has stopped.

Hear the music
not playing?
Yet dancing,
I swing you to Canada
and back.
You two-step me
To New York and
Mississippi and your heart.

Hope finds us this hour
before sunset.
The sun may not rise
tomorrow.
Thoughts of a brother getting his hair twisted on a Sunday afternoon

Fingers entangled in a mass of human foliage, digging deeper and deeper into his scalp she finds order through chaos. Strands of hair are viola strings, musician fingers whipping them to shape. Young shapely girls twisting their hips to the sound of wind whistling through city park trees. Sitting between her legs on a city step, she jerks his head from left to right he ignores the tenderness, closes his eyes, and continues to fly his mental kite.

Brothers dip-walking then disappearing to clandestine locations. An old chap nods at a bus-stop wishes he was young again. His half-eaten sandwich spotted by a homeless man. Two old ladies in yellow sundresses and purple bonnets purposely stroll to one more church meeting. A brother getting his hair twisted on a Sunday afternoon, smiles at little nappy headed boys kicking a can to a sewer drain in a game of street soccer.

Newborn dreads sprouting like wild mushrooms tickling new thoughts, messaging dreams, pushing through old earth with new life.

He imagines somewhere in the world a sister planting seeds in backyard earth. Her fingers manipulating the ground, the ground responds with rich moist finger food. And he eagerly cleans her fingers with his tongue like a child cleaning mama’s cake bowl.

Thick beautiful women with childbearing hips in poke-a-dot dresses dancing to the vibration of a brothers thoughts and wishes on a Sunday afternoon in a Southern American city.

He envisions five black men standing in a circle, speaking with deep voices in low tones. Conspiracy theories abound between sips of whiskey shared from a single bottle.
They began humming then singing quietly,
a love supreme, a love supreme, a love supreme.
They suddenly knew they were connected
like natty dreads on a black man’s head.

The night stopped
and listened to these men.
Everything stopped.
No sound,
no dogs barked,
no sirens,
no radios played.
Just humming and quite singing.

Calm voices echoed over mountain tops
to the valleys below.
The song landed on wings of birds and
backs of turtles touching every living thing.
The song flew to war torn lands spreading peace like a virus.
To the children it gave pretty thoughts
like chocolate butterflies melting on the sunshine
of a Florida day.
The song stroked the afflicted and gave them comfort
of a woman’s breast.
The song seeped into the atmosphere and nourished all the plants
and weeds and flowers and dreadlocks on the planet.

On this day knowledge rained on the heads of the ignorant,
washed away their close-mindedness.
A higher conscientiousness instinctively emerged,
new citizens grew out of the concrete
and built new spiritual cities, enlightened townships
and free-thinking hamlets for dreamers.

These are but a few
thoughts of a brother getting his hair twisted on a Sunday afternoon.
True Lies

There wasn’t anything else I could do
This lie begins with a fact about a true
Story
She died in my arms whispering softly
I hate you

Me too
I thought as I tightened my caress
To something stronger than a hug
I hate me too

This lie about hate is the truth about love

My hands now around her throat
Staring into her eyes
Seeing every lie I ever told
Every indiscretion ever made

Every time I cheated
On a test
On her
On myself

Her eyes mirrored my lies
She died telling the truth about me
I didn’t want to kill her
I loved her

There wasn’t anything else I could do
Cutter

Blood soaked towels hidden in the laundry room remind me of a tourniquet I once tied.

She has waged war on herself. Love is sick with selfish desires. I curse her for this irrational ritual.

Razor blades cutting flesh. Old scars like tiny tiger stripes have not faded with time. New ones being made.

She is unfazed for she has fixed her room to celebrate this occasion. The smell of sandalwood permeates the air.

Candles flicker her sad silhouette against sultry jazz playing to shadows of empty Prozac bottles dancing on the wall behind her.

She just looks and smiles like a child proud of A picture she has drawn.

I grab an overnight bag I keep packed for quick trips. I whisper in a calm voice “I’ll be back when the bleeding Stops.”
This is not an Ars Poetica

What is this thing,
what is this thing that is everywhere
and nowhere around every
corner falling from every blue
sky. Lifting itself from soft pallets
landing safely on the tiny drum
inside every ear. Singing, crying
and laughing and counting, yes
counting every single year that
was and will be. Measuring pain,
loneliness, lovely girl hips, the
tips of rose petals. The color
purple. The sound of nothing
the smell of spring rain. It has found
everything and still searches still,
for truth told another way. It
has found God down that old
dusty Mississippi road, sitting
in that red wheel barrel next to those
chickens. It has known rivers,
ancient dusky rivers. It has
walked through woods on a
snowy evening. It has played
physics on guitar strings, it
has found everything yet,
it still searches for truth told
a different way. What is this
thing that compels my pen to
speak of a single blade of grass,
an orange peel, the feel of something
blue. The dead. The Sea. The truth.
What is this thing. Calling my name
out loud, silently whispering.
Invisible

It’s not that bad being invisible
moving in and out
of certain gatherings
gaining all the advantages
of being there
without being noticed
not being called upon
to expose my shortcomings
not to mention my ass
to man-eating pseudo
intellectuals searching
for fresh meat
to hunt and kill
and categorize
“so what do you do?”

It’s not that bad being invisible
except when hailing a cab
in a downpour at midnight
on the wrong side of town
Go

I must go
To places I’ve never been
To places on maps I have not seen
From my own hometown

Sand Mountain

Ghetto beaches for example
Imaginings in the making
My favorite things
I have not seen

Yet know and love nevertheless
Like pure honey, real spring water
The honest to god truth
The Auroras

Homespun tobacco
An honest politician
An unselfish woman
A real man

I wanna go home
Wherever that is
Africa perhaps
Gil Scot said home
Is where the hatred is

I must be home
Black Ink

Part 1

The pad of pain
Absorbing black ink
Running down a poets
Sad head
Two women loved by one
Can’t call neither
Can write though
A quartet of babies cry in dreams
Only one can see
Their tears tattooed on cheeks
For weeks hope is kept alive
But she sleeps on a cold flat stone
Bones won’t accept May’s warmth
Winter stiff thoughts erase the color from spring leaves
A man afraid of no one is scared to death
Death seems like his friend
Life refuses to end
Forced dreams of cool lakes and hungry fish
Come and go

Part 2

I slow my thoughts
Hoping to find the gap between them
I film the mental past in slow motion
And edit every brutal scene
Kicks in the head
Spit and piss
And miss-spoken words
Parade my closed eyes
Fat girls in poke-a-dot dresses
Angry black and white faces in my face
Only traces of myself exists
God insists I’m here for a reason
This season I think is the season
For black ink
1) A lesson on how to grow flowers
2) This is not the end

Line 21, this is not the end.
I will start here, in the middle of the circle. I am not lost, not yet. I will nurture my garden. Traveling back and forth and finding then losing and finding again the love, I never really had. It is near me like the sun warming my face on a winter day, I am still cold, hopeful. Seasons change. I wonder if I’ve grown, yes. I am now at the beginning of my life again. This time I will be careful, I will pace myself, I will plant my seeds in a garden the shape of a triangle. I will notice the buds before I trample them. I am thirsty, the sky is too blue. I have come full circle, my life is not over, this is not the end.
A poet dreams of baseballs (inspired by black poets lean south)

I catch these poets like baseballs find familiar mitts. Southern sun squinting eyes, ears hearing ghosts hollering from railroad tracks behind the baseball field.

Black poets leaning on me, I feel the weight of words lifted from my aching back. I throw them back to eager ears on white paper.

Dead poets giving life to new ones south of the mason dixon border. Same game new players on this field where dreams die young.

Sweat rolling down my face like barbeque sauce. licking my lips and thinking of a fresh pot of collard dreams.

I’ll sleep tonight in left field and wait for the Sheriff to take me home by the bottom of the ninth.
Drunk Again

People came in, but I didn’t notice them.
The party was just getting started and
I started to drift into cocktail party indifference
noticing nothing significant.

Floating from punchbowl to patio
to the piano player punching out
a Monk tune caught me by surprise.
I opened for the first time, my mind.

To this gathering of literary imitating
intoxicating fabricating pseudo… fools
not seeing the ocean for the water
drinking lies untold yet.

Then she came in.

She caught my ear listening to
the sad sway of her hips
tiptoeing to my empty heart.

We spoke without speaking
touched without touching.
I followed the dream I would have.
Tonight would be different.

Un-perfumed skin sent signals
to spirits dead.
Who is this calling my own private
fear.

I was drowning in the martini glass
She threw me a life jacket
the air sucked out of the room,
like a baby emptying her bottle.

I can’t get no satisfaction
ain’t my favorite song no more.

People came in, but I didn’t notice them.
I extended my hand
opened my mouth
with wine o breath
I chased her away again.
Bicycling at Midnight

The silent pedal of midnight observation
No exhaust to worry my green friends
Gladys Cravits will not know when I have come
And Gone

Blue uniforms do not profile bicycles yet
I still wear shades and a baseball cap
Just in case
The red traffic light never catches me

I see things others cannot see
Curtains partially opened at midnight
Revealing some unknown silhouette
That could me on the other side

Waiting patiently for my lover
To return from her female bathroom break
Applying my breaks
Making no sound

James Bond should have had one of these
To ease in and out of my neighborhood
His Alpha Romero would have been too obvious
A black Lite Speed might have done the trick

The danger would have been in the get-a-way
Only the hood rats would notice
But they an’t talking
Like a shooting star at midnight

It comes and goes at the same time
Thinking about James Baldwin after the Party

James found his pen
When others had crashed in
The party fresh to the end

John is in the john throwing up
Susan is upstairs throwing down
I am searching drunken pockets for a pen

To deaden the sounds of this party’s end

Thoughts of Sky with olive eyes
And Jaz as no surprise
Find me here to compromise
An image of a lonely woman

Between her legs her hands are kept warm
Moist visions fill my eyes
She is alone because of me
I wish I couldn’t see

The reflection of me in this empty glass
Running away again from my own ass
Like a dog chasing his tail
This tale is chasing me
Cleaning House

The blue glow spilling from the trashcan in my living room
Giving me mental cramps
Images of army camps and TV commercial tramps
Evade my minds attempt to find nothing
Something is about to happen
My eyes are filling up and running over with bullshit
One drop at a time
I remember every lie I ever heard or told
Forced to un-crack the egg I un-hypnotize myself
I remember the best way to see the sun is to close your eyes
I remember smelling salt from the ocean the first time
I remember thinking I might actually be free
I remember my father yelling
“Cut off that TV and go climb a tree”
My room is quiet save the hum from the blue box
My 15 minutes of meditation is coming to an end
I clean-up my living room by empting the trash can
A Boy’s Wish

I know this boy, he knows me.
He does not know his father.
His father does not know him.
He doesn’t want to.

If only he knew

A boy cannot be more beautiful.
Skin cannot be more black.
Unblemished melanin rich,
with spots of baby fat.

His eyes now too innocent
to see this fools inability.
To recognize the strongest
branch on his families’ tree.

If only he knew

Eleven plus eleven is twenty-two.
A boy times his life is a man.
The boy will forget.
The man would not stand for this nonsense.

I look into the boy’s eyes
and I recognize the solar and the lunar eclipse.
I inject into his veins my surrogate blood,
and watch us both grow rich.

The boy’s spirit flies above his ignorant blood.
Left to rot like fish heads floating down the river.
The stench will follow the sad dad until he is buried
in the inevitable flood of this boy’s wish.
My Wife

Stuffing my love, my lover,
my wife into mental envelopes.
Sometimes opening and wishing,
always dreaming our sweet
memories in poems.
Stumbling on old photos of big paper
smiles of forgotten scenes.
I imagine I’m dead and
I’m someone else wishing
I were me.
Last Song

My girlfriend got her hair braided tonight.
A lonely young woman’s hands find joy
making ends meet.
Gil-Scott Heron sings of ‘Winter in America’,
on a cool summer LA night.
Radio waves tingle my knotty dread,
while a blue eyed, nine year old,
black girl, tosses in her bed.
She dreams her daddy is coming home.
These are the first lyrics of my last song.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Vita

George Conley, Jr. was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, to parents George and Gertrude Conley. He is the middle child of five siblings. He graduated from Chattanooga High where he discovered his interest in poetry and formed a close relationship with his English Teacher, Mrs. Bettis, who encouraged him to express himself through creative writing. After high school, George served a three-year tour of duty in the United States Army where he worked in Military Intelligence. He returned home to attend the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga where he met the love of his life, Anita D. Polk. They were soon married and today are the proud parents of Sky and Jasmine Conley. George received his Bachelors of Arts in Communications in 1984 and worked in radio and television for several years. Ultimately George spent most of his professional career working in higher education as a student services administrator. He returned to University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and graduated with a Masters of Arts degree in English, Creative Writing/Poetry, May 2010.