

Paul S. Briggs: An Intuitive Response in Clay
The Poetry Series



“won’t you celebrate with me”

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

Poem: Lucille Clifton
Sculpture: Paul S. Briggs

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“Poem No. 10”

You keep saying you were always there
waiting for me to see you.
you said that once
on the wings of a pale green butterfly
you rode across san francisco’s hills
and touched my hair as i caressed
a child called militancy
you keep saying you were always there

holding my small hand
as I walked
unbending Indiana streets i could not see
around
and you grew a black mountain
of curves and i turned
and became soft again
you keep saying you were always there



repeating my name softly
as i slept in
slow Pittsburgh blues and you made me
sweat nite dreams that danced
and danced until morning
rained yo/red delirium

you keep saying you were always there
you keep saying you were always there
will you stay love
now that I am here?

Poem: Sonia Sanchez
Sculpture: Paul S. Briggs

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“The Negro Speaks of Rivers”

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
 flow of human blood in human veins.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
 went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
 bosom turn all golden in the sunset.
I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Poem: Langston Hughes
Sculpture: Paul S. Briggs

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"Momma's Sayings"

Momma had words for us:
We were "crumb crushers,"
"eating machines,"
"bottomless pits."
She made us charter members
of the bonepickers' club,
saying, "Just don't let your eyes get bigger
than your stomachs."
Saying, "Take all you want,
but eat all you take."
Saying, "I'm not made of money, you know,
and the man at tile Safeway
don't give away groceries for free."

She trained us not to leave lights on
"a11 over the house,"
because "electricity cots money –
so please turn the light off when you leave a room
and take the white man's hand out of my pocket."

When we wore small
she called our feet "ant mashers,"
but when we'd outgrow our shoes,
our feet became "platforms."
She told us we must be growing big feet
to support some big heavysset women
(like our grandma Tiddly).

When she had to buy us new underwear
to replace the old ones full of holes,
she'd swear we were growing razor blades in
our behinds,
"you tear these drawers up so fast."

Momma had words for us, alright:
She called us "the wrecking crew."
She said our untidy bedroom
looked like "a cyclone struck it."

Our dirty fingernails she called "victory gardens."
And when we'd come in from playing outside
she'd tell us, "You smell like iron rust." She'd say,
"Go take a bath
and get some of that funk off or you."
But when the water ran too long in the tub
she'd yell "That's enough water to wash an elephant."
And after the bath she'd say,
"Be sure and grease those ashy legs."
She'd lemon creme our elbows
and pull the hot comb
through "these touch kinks on your head."

Momma had lots of words for us,
her never quite perfect daughters,
the two brown pennies she wanted to polish
so we'd shine like dimes.

Poem: Harryette Mullen
Sculpture: Paul S. Briggs



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"Caged Bird"

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn
and he names the sky his own

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.



Poem: Maya Angelou
Sculpture: Paul S. Briggs

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"Power"

Audrey Lorde

The difference between poetry and rhetoric
is being ready to kill
yourself
instead of your children.

I am trapped on a desert of raw gunshot wounds
and a dead child dragging his shattered black
face off the edge of my sleep
blood from his punctured cheeks and shoulders
is the only liquid for miles
and my stomach
churns at the imagined taste while
my mouth splits into dry lips
without loyalty or reason
thirsting for the wetness of his blood
as it sinks into the whiteness
of the desert where I am lost
without imagery or magic
trying to make power out of hatred and destruction
trying to heal my dying son with kisses
only the sun will bleach his bones quicker.

A policeman who shot down a ten year old in Queens
stood over the boy with his cop shoes in childish blood
and a voice said "Die you little motherfucker" and
there are tapes to prove it. At his trial
this policeman said in his own defense
"I didn't notice the size nor nothing else
only the color". And
there are tapes to prove that, too.

Today that 37 year old white man
with 13 years of police forcing
was set free
by eleven white men who said they were satisfied
justice had been done
and one Black Woman who said
"They convinced me" meaning
they had dragged her 4'10" black Woman's frame

over the hot coals
of four centuries of white male approval
until she let go
the first real power she ever had
and lined her own womb with cement
to make a graveyard for our children.

I have not been able to touch the destruction
within me.
But unless I learn to use
the difference between poetry and rhetoric
my power too will run corrupt as poisonous mold
or lie limp and useless as an unconnected wire
and one day I will take my teenaged plug
and connect it to the nearest socket
raping an 85 year old white woman
who is somebody's mother
and as I beat her senseless and set a torch to her bed
a greek chorus will be singing in 3/4 time
"Poor thing. She never hurt a soul. What beasts they are."

