

1975

Free Fantasia: Tiger Flowers

Robert Hayden

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The First Act of Liberation Is to Destroy One's Cage / Michael S. Harper

For Black poets, in particular, *the first act of liberation is to destroy one's cage*; one acquires the techniques of expression, chooses one's form, has the will, makes the choice: to become an *image-maker*. The true poet writes out of *experience transformed by technique into liberation*: a transformational act, in deed. The poet's function is to force the reader/listener to change one's life, to acquire those missing parts needed to make one's survival-kit-of-escape function, to make oneself whole. Some helpful tools of technical assistance include: a sense of heroic tradition; conjure knowledge; struggle as a modal perception of living; a sense of optimism; a belief in testimony and the testamental process, for man is spiritual, an art form, to be beautified, to be educated in the manifest (seen) and the potential (unseen) aspects of his being; a rigor of improvisation that can transform one's sense of reality; the ability to focus with intent (conjure) for the magical aspects *image-making*; an insistence on revelation as an antidote to pathology, the healing song of transcendence through ritual, from a moral perspective, from a sense of cosmology, a sense of oneness; a knowledge of cages, many velvet-carpeted, some with magnificent views, but no *vision*: to look is not necessarily to see/to see is to have vision/"*straight, no chaser*" said the musician, says the image-maker.

Free Fantasia: Tiger Flowers / Robert Hayden

(for Michael)

The sporting people
along St. Antoine—
that scufflers'
paradise of ironies—
bet salty money
on his righteous
hook and jab.

I was a boy then, running
(unbeknownst to Pa)
errands for Miss Jackie
and Stack-o'-Diamonds' Eula Mae.
. . . Their perfumes,
rouged Egyptian faces.
 Their pianolas jazzing.

O Creole babies,
Dixie odalisques,
speeding through cutglass
dark to see the macho angel
 trick you'd never
turn, his bluesteel prowess
 in the ring.

Hardshell believers
amen'd the wreck
as God A'mighty's
will. I'd thought
 such gaiety could not
die. Nor could our
 elegant avenger.

The Virgin Forest
by Rousseau—
its psychedelic flowers
towering, its deathless
 dark dream-figure
death the leopard
 claws—I choose it
now as elegy
 for Tiger Flowers.

“Good Night, Willie Lee, I’ll See You in the Morning” / Alice Walker

Looking down into my father's
dead face
for the last time