

Texts for 19th x 21st Century Poetic Crossings:

Paul Laurence Dunbar, "An Ante-Bellum Sermon" (Evie Shockley)

We is gathahed hyeah, my brothahs,
In di howlin' wildaness,
Fu' to speak some words o comfo't
to each othah in distress.
An' we choose fu' ouah subjc'
Dis—we'll 'splain it by an' by;
"An' de Lawd said, "Moses, Moses,"
An' de man said, Hyeah am I."

Now ole Pher'oh, down in Egypt
Was de wuss man evah bo'n,
An' he had de Hebrew chillun
Down dah wukin' in his co'n;
'Twell de Lawd got tiahed o' his foolin',
an' sez he: "I'll let him know'
Look hyeah, Moses, go tell Pher'oh
Fu' to let dem chillun go."

"An' ef he refuse do it,
I will make him rue de houah,
fu' I'll empty down on Egypt
All de vials of my powah."
Yes, he did—an' Pher'oh's ahmy
Wasn't wurth a ha'f a dime;
Fu' de Lawd will he'p his chillum,
You kin trust him evah time.

An' you' enemies may 'sail you
In de back an' in de front;
But de Lawd is all aroun' you,
Fu' to ba' de battle's brunt.
Dey kin fo'ge yo'chains an' shackles
F'om de mountains to de sea;
But de Lawd will sen' some Moses
Fu' to set his chilun free.

An' de lan' shall hyeah his thundah,
Lak a blas' f'om Gab'el's ho'n,
Fu' de Lawd of hosts is mighty
When he girds his ahmor on.
But fu' feah some one mistakes me,
I will pause right hyeah to say,
Dat I'm still a-preachin' ancient,
I ain't talkin' bout to-day.

But I tell you, fellah christuns,
Things'll happen mighty strange;
Now, de Lawd done dis fu' Isrul,
An' his ways don't nevah change,
An' de love he showed to Isrul
Wasn't all on Isrul spent;
Now don't run an' tell yo' mastahs
Dat I's preachin' discontent.

'Cause I isn't; I'se a-judgin'
Bible people by dier ac's;
I'se a-givin' you de Scriptuah,
I'se a-handin' you de fac's.
Cose ole Pher'or b'lieved in slav'ry,
But de Lawd he let him see,
Dat de people he put bref in,
Evah mothah's son was free.

An' dah's othahs thinks lak Pher'or,
But dey calls de Scriptuah liar,
Fu' de Bible says "a servant
Is worthy of his hire,"
An' you cain't git roun' nor thoo dat,
An' you cain't git ovah it,
Fu' whatevah place you git in,
Dis hyeah Bible too'll fit.

So you see de Lawd's intention,
Evah sence de worl' began,
Was dat His almight freedom
Should belong to evah man,
But I think it would be bettah,
Ef I'd pause agin to say,
Dat I'm talkin' 'bout ouah freedom
In a Bibleistic way.

But de Moses is a-comin',
An' he's comin', suah and fas'
We kin hyeah his feet a-trompin',
We kin hyeah his trumpit blas'.
But I want to wa'n you people,
Don't you git too brigity;
An' don't you git to braggin'
"Bout dese things, you wait an' see.

But when Moses wif his powah
Comes an' sets us chillun free,
We will praise de gracious Mastah

Dat has gin us liberty;
An' we'll shout ouah halleluyahs,
On dat mighty reck'nin' day,
When we'se reco'nised ez citiz'
Huh uh! Chillun, let us pray!

Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Expectation" (Amaud Jamaul Johnson)

You 'll be wonderin' whut 's de reason
I 's a grinnin' all de time,
An' I guess you t'ink my sperits
Mus' be feelin' mighty prime.
Well, I 'fess up, I is tickled
As a puppy at his paws.
But you need n't think I's crazy,
I ain' laffin' 'dout a cause.

You's a wonderin' too, I reckon,
Why I does n't seem to eat,
An' I notice you a lookin'
Lak you felt completely beat
When I 'fuse to tek de bacon,
An' don' settle on de ham.
Don' you feel no feah erbout me,
Jes' keep eatin', an' be ca'm.

Fu' I's waitin' an' I's watchin'
'Bout a little t'ing I see—
D' othah night I's out a walkin'
An' I passed a 'simmon tree.
Now I's whettin' up my hongry,
An' I's laffin' fit to kill,
Fu' de fros' done turned de 'simmons,
An' de possum 's eat his fill.

He done go'ged hisse'f owdacious,
An' he stayin' by de tree!
Don' you know, ol' Mistah Possum
Dat you gittin' fat fu' me?
'T ain't no use to try to 'spute it,
'Case I knows you's gittin' sweet
Wif dat 'simmon flavoh thoo you,
So I's waitin' fu' yo' meat.

An' some ebenin' me an Towsah
Gwine to come an' mek a call,
We jes' drap in onexpected

Fu' to shek yo' han', dat's all.
Oh, I knows dat you 'll be tickled,
Seems lak I kin see you smile,
So pu'haps I mought pu'suade you
Fu' to visit us a while.

Terrance Hayes, "Antebellum House Party" (Virginia Jackson)

To make the servant in the corner unobjectionable
Furniture, we must first make her a bundle of tree parts
Axed and worked to confidence. Oak-jawed, birch-backed,

Cedar-skinned, a pillowy bosom for the boss infants,
A fine patterned cushion the boss can fall upon.
Furniture does not pine for a future wherein the boss

Plantation house will be ransacked by cavalries or Calvary.
A kitchen table can, in the throes of a yellow-fever outbreak,
Become a cooling board holding the boss wife's body.

It can on ordinary days also be an ironing board holding
Boss garments in need of ironing. Tonight it is simply a place
For a white cup of coffee, a tin of white cream. Boss calls

For sugar and the furniture bears it sweetly. Let us fill the mouth
Of the boss with something stored in the pantry of a house
War, decency, nor bedevilled storms can wipe from the past.

Furniture's presence should be little more than a warm feeling
In the den. The dog staring into the fireplace imagines each log
Is a bone that would taste like a spiritual wafer on his tongue.

Let us imagine the servant ordered down on all fours
In the manner of an ottoman whereupon the boss volume
Of John James Audubon's "Birds of America" can be placed.

Antebellum residents who possessed the most encyclopedic
Bookcases, luxurious armoires, and beds with ornate cotton
Canopies often threw the most photogenic dinner parties.

Long after they have burned to ash, the hound dog sits there
Mourning the succulent bones he believes the logs used to be.
Imagination is often the boss of memory. Let us imagine

Music is radiating through the fields as if music were reward
For suffering. A few of the birds Audubon drew are now extinct.
The Carolina parakeet, passenger pigeon, and Labrador duck

No longer nuisance the boss property. With so much
Furniture about, there are far fewer woods. Is furniture's fate
As tragic as the fate of an axe, the part of a tree that helps

Bring down more upstanding trees? The best furniture
Can stand so quietly in a room that the room appears empty.
If it remains unbroken, it lives long enough to become antique.

Natasha Tretheway, "Enlightenment" (Radclani Clytus)

In the portrait of Jefferson that hangs
at Monticello, he is rendered two-toned:
his forehead white with illumination—

a lit bulb—the rest of his face in shadow,
darkened as if the artist meant to contrast
his bright knowledge, its dark subtext.

By 1805, when Jefferson sat for the portrait,
he was already linked to an affair
with his slave. Against a backdrop, blue

and ethereal, a wash of paint that seems
to hold him in relief, Jefferson gazes out
across the centuries, his lips fixed as if

he's just uttered some final word.
The first time I saw the painting, I listened
as my father explained the contradictions:

how Jefferson hated slavery, though—*out*
of necessity, my father said—had to own
slaves; that his moral philosophy meant

he could not have fathered those children:
would have been impossible, my father said.
For years we debated the distance between

word and deed. I'd follow my father from book
to book, gathering citations, listen
as he named—like a field guide to Virginia—

each flower and tree and bird as if to prove
a man's pursuit of knowledge is greater
than his shortcomings, the limits of his vision.

I did not know then the subtext
of our story, that my father could imagine
Jefferson's words made flesh in my flesh—

*the improvement of the blacks in body
and mind, in the first instance of their mixture
with the whites*—or that my father could believe

he'd made me *better*. When I think of this now,
I see how the past holds us captive,
its beautiful ruin etched on the mind's eye:

my young father, a rough outline of the old man
he's become, needing to show me
the better measure of his heart, an equation

writ large at Monticello. That was years ago.
Now, we take in how much has changed:
talk of Sally Hemings, someone asking,

how white was she?—parsing the fractions
as if to name what made her worthy
of Jefferson's attentions: a near-white,

quadroon mistress, not a plain black slave.
Imagine stepping back into the past,
our guide tells us then—and I can't resist

whispering to my father: this is where
we split up. I'll head around to the back.
When he laughs, I know he's grateful

I've made a joke of it, this history
that links us—white father, black daughter—
even as it renders us other to each other.