

I'm a Rollin'

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Truth Sonnet

After Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), "Ain't I a Woman?" (1851)

Obj: Lord Jesus wasn't a woman, but a man.

Ans: Christ's born of not man, but woman and God!

Obj: By knowledge her minds will be overawed,
Her intellect's unfit for men's domain.

Ans: If her mind fills a pint and yours a quart,
Won't you let her have her half measure full?

Obj: "Ladies' First" is our only rule and role.

Ans: Well, ain't I a woman? When you for sport
And lust tore my family asunder,
None but Jesus heard my mother's holler!
Look at me! Look at my arm! I ploughed and
Bore 13 children and lashes thunder
-ing

If women's rights put you out of kilter
Child, let me set you right side up again.

Tocqueville Ghazal

After Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), Democracy in America (1835)

In 1831, I made a nine-month journey through eastern America
To write *Democracy in America*

Inheritance laws dividing up land equally among children
Within two generations obliterated aristocracy in N. America

Given equal social conditions, each urban American worships profit
Permanence in equal possession is tomfoolery in America

Like Louis XIV, the American voters are *never* wrong;
Unlike the tyrant, unbeatable is the tyranny of the majority in America

Mediocre happiness for all over intellectual glory
Glory means both hard-earned and slave-born prosperity in America

In America, a woman is neither demeaned as a womanly man nor manly woman:
Intelligent women are worshipped in the cult of domesticity in America

Negroes and Indians must destroy the Whites or
Inevitably be destroyed by White democracy in America

Negro slaves in the South, and freedmen in the North will never live on the same footing
Indelible is the shame of Blackness in the cupidity in America

In the South, White masters habitually cave in to lust,
and rape Black women—wives of slaves—in the savagery of America

In the North, no White man dares to touch a Black woman
Racial equality under the law increases personal racial enmity in America

The U.S. Government promises Cherokee Indians settlement upon a fertile reservation land
Hope in land away from their conquered fatherland, pledged by the democracy in America

When babies cry out in hunger and the elders die from the winter chill
The few arrive curse at the fallow desert which is the hypocrisy of America

The Indians marched silently, bravely towards a promised land with many buffalos
Emptier and colder than the Indian corpses is the democracy of America

In 1831, while struck by the equality of Anglo-American social conditions
I wrote on the side of the animosity among the three races in my *Democracy in America*

Darwin Pantoum

After Charles Darwin (1809-1882), Origin of Species (1859) and Descent of Men (1871)

Throughout all world, scrutinizing every variation,
Nature compares each individual with its competition,
Rejects the bad, adds up the good variations,
Tending towards perfection.

Nature compares each individual with its competition.
Fair is the survival of the fittest,
Tending towards perfection.
Fair is females' choice of reproduce only with the finest.

Fair is the survival of the fittest
until wealth and rank are introduced.
Fair is females' choice of reproduce only with the finest
until intelligence and virtue no longer seduced.

When wealth and rank are introduced:

Q: Can the abject poor marry
when intelligence and virtue no longer seduced?

A: The poor should be allowed to marry.

Q (again): Can the abject poor marry?

The poor might die of hunger!

A: The poor should be allowed to marry

For only with nature can humans advance still higher

Nature selects the best of the best individual through mortality,
Rejects the bad, adds up the good variations.
Even when men's conscience becomes *the* judge of morality,
In slums and ghettos, Nature continues scrutinizing *every* variation.

Smith Triolet

After Adam Smith (1723-1790), Wealth of Nations (1776)

Can a society be flourishing
when most of its members are abject poor?
When food, clothes, and a warm home is missing
No society can be flourishing
When masters pay sustenance wage
 Starving
children
 women
 lead hungry men
 to gore!
No society can be flourishing
when most of its members are abject poor!

Rousseau Décima

After Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality (1755)

Men are born free but everywhere in chains:

In the state of nature, your love of self
means doing as much good for yourself
while doing as little harm to others.

Then came

philosophy:

Mind only your own pain.

Fighting men are stopped by market women

Untaught and derided by learned men

Meanwhile philosophers move on, unconcerned.

Right to dominate is force;

Force is right earned

to dominate, to enslave over men.

Wollstonecraft Villanelle

After Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792)

“Women” means weakness, contempt and pity
Stop!

 You who’re pregnant with evil ideas
of luring women when you’re dizzy
with pride till...

 in your sobriety
she becomes your wife, your lawful sex slave
“Women” means weakness, contempt and pity

A rattle now, she jingles anxiously
at your pleasure, O masculine knave
who deprecates her when you’re tipsy

OR

 you leave her deflowered: a pretty
flower suited for the red-light enclave
“Women” means weakness, contempt and pity

Well versed for her sedentary prep for busi-
ness she moves (barely) to adorn her cave
as pitiable as you are filthy

Sans education, women are silly
Schooled as prostitutes in manners profane
“Women” means weakness, contempt and pity
Only to a guilty society

Douglass Sestina

After Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" (1852) and "The Constitution of the United States: Is It Pro-Slavery or Anti-Slavery?" (1860)

July 5, 1852.

*Streams flow and turn aside: as with rivers,
so with nations.*

I come a fettered slave
to sing at the Temple of Liberty
to you who mock in infinite cruelty
my enslavement by the Constitution

I speak of my life, you hypocrites
I refuse to sing in hypocrisy
of *our* hard-wrought freedom by the River
of Babylon.

US Constitution
Article IV, Section 2, Clause 3: "slave"
is nowhere found.

He is exempt by cruelty—
For an article can't have the liberty
to even make a contract—

"Liberty
is for Whites only," say you, hypocrites
who preach with your hands full of *our* blood.

Cruel
man hunter: it's the fish in the river
and dogs in your streets who are brutes, not slaves

In its plain reading, the Constitution
mentions "slave" not once.

The Constitution,
I had thought, was a pact with hell.

Liberty
will ring only when the internal slave
trade isn't upheld by you, hypocrites

"Cash for Negroes" at Patapsco River
Crack Scream the woman with the babe. Cruelty

Of her nude display at auction. Cruelty
of slave trade challenged in the Constitution:

1808: troops cut off the river
of Transatlantic manhunt.

Liberty
in the shrinking pond of hypocrisy
as you whisper at night *repeal* *slave-*
ry.

The inhumane can't be divine. Slaves
are now birds for a sportsman's gun. Cruelty
had been nationalized by hypocrites
who assert contra the Constitution
For Blacks there *are* no law and liberty
While we may not turn aside the river,

The river will dry up leaving nothing, no slaves
fettered at the Temple of Liberty
but all men free under the Constitution

Du Bois Blues

After W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963), The Soul of the Black Folk (1903)

How does it feel to be a problem?

How does it feel to be the problem?

 Their pity makes my blood boil:

 I smile and keep mum

Field Order 15: 40 acres and a mule

Field Order 15 promises: 40 acres and a mule

 Hypocrisy makes my blood boil:

 I burn and keep mum

An old woman at Sea Island sang:

 You haven't seen the trouble I've seen

 You haven't seen the Trouble I've seen

 The crowd joined the rollin'

 and the soldier-messenger wept

Atlanta Compromise rang: the Negroes are fools

Atlanta Compromise: the Negroes are fools

 The universities joined the rollin'

 and Negroes are kept

away from colleges in industrial schools

away from civil rights, away from polls

 The crowd joined the rollin'

 and the Negroe sang:

 I'm a rollin'

 I'm a rollin'

 The Negro's degradation makes my blood boil:

 And I kept mum no more.

The almsgiving is generous to a fault

The almsgiving is generous to a fault

Thank you Sir, Thank you Mam

 The half-devil and half-child's joined the rollin'

 in profuse thanks

My blood boils, and I

And I say:

One day, Negroes will look at your money and your lore
of White supremacy in sullen anger

Then
we will
watch
your
blood
boil

watch
you
raise
hell:

So, how does it feel to be a problem?

Du Bois Bop

After W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963), "The Soul of the White Folk" (1920)

All that is good and fine is White
But what does Whiteness signify?
That White is always Right,
Or that Black Men like Confucius, Buddha and Jesus Christ have no right
which a White man is bound to respect
is a modern discovery

The Dark World is going to submit just as long as it must
and not a minute longer

The Darkies are dark in body, mind, and morals
Writes the vast White human hatred at innocent dares
 of the silent woman at the back of a Pullman
 of the little child wandering to the wrong waiting room
 of the motor car in Central Park

The Darkies are beasts of burden
Who must be tamed of their Blackness
through commerce and civilization

The Dark World is going to submit just as long as it must
and not a minute longer

For the half-devil and half-child
White men like a swarm of hungry locusts
Fought to become tyrants, slave masters, and rapists

Behold fallen Belgium and remember the 12 million Congo dead
The War is not Whiteness gone mad: it

is
Whiteness

Belief in humanity
 is
 Belief in Darkness

Prose Poem with Gandhi and Fanon

After Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), “Swaraj” (1908) and Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), “On Violence,” *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961)

Decolonization can “be summed up in well-known words: ‘The last shall be the first.’”

—*The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon

Soul force says to the oppressor: “If you do not concede to our demands, we shall no longer be your petitioners.” Body force says: “If you do not resist, we shall punish you.” At its base, body force is violence. Violence betrays *ahisma*. Instead of the negative love of non-violence we have violence, and instead of the positive love of compassion we have violence. True fearlessness, Gandhi says, lies not in the tell-tale heart trembling to pull the trigger on the oppressor man, but in walking towards the loaded trigger with no hate.

So Madan Lal Dhingra walked, with a huge smile. He was blown to pieces by the British canon on August 17, 1909, age 25. Dhingra was mad with “blind love,” Gandhi says, since those who take the sword should perish by the sword. While force does not create right, when 100 million pounds—enough to feed 83 million Indian peasants—are exported to England every year, something is out of kilter. The colonized Indians are dying, fearlessly, addicted to Manchester textile as the Chinese is to opium.

Men like Dhingra thought that *passive resistance* to an objectionable law was not enough: the dehumanizing laws had no authority over them. When being Black means being a brute, means being presumed guilty, soul force is the mentality of slaves: an imagination of higher power where none is in use. Until the time for dancing in the streets, and the last becomes the first and the first the last, there shall always force: the force of love of one’s humanity, one’s family and one’s community, the force of hate.

Only fair means can produce fair ends, Gandhi says. Else, we shall adopt the ways of the tiger and be the hunters we so despise. Yet when the choice is between being a man hunter or being slaughtered like animals, when guilt is presumed, when the penalty is death to human integrity, then violence alone, it seems, can produce change.