

## MOMMA

Now and then she said things that made my ears frown.  
More than likely they were just too young to understand.  
“Brush those teeth, and wash your feet before you go to bed.  
And stop snoring so loud. You keep everybody awake.”

Pig feet, turnip greens and chitlins put hair on the chest.  
My stomach craved apple butter and crackling bread.  
It had a mind of its own. It wasn't looking for hair.  
Sunday school was particularly necessary, but not enough.  
Reverend Frockcoat's bland sermons had to sanctify the day.

Some other things stood in my way—  
Talking too much when I should have listened,  
Crying when laughing was better,  
Shooting marbles when the cattle needed feed.

Momma's most relentless warning stuck like claws.  
“Son, don't ever come home blaming your skin's blackness  
For tumbling you downward.  
If a white boy can do something worth doing,  
Remember you can do it too. When the time comes  
Just get out there and do it—or forget to come home.”

Much later, long after she was gone,  
And swimming in her advice, I've tried to keep going,  
Going and going.

Down through the years, her warnings helped push clouds away—  
While sopping tears from stars that insisted on falling.  
Yes, it was Momma who spread the checkered tablecloth.  
But it was my good fortune to sit down and eat.

Her love filled the space between heaven and hell.  
She was a mother beyond all other mothers.  
I owe her everything—  
My breath in the half light of autumn,  
For spreading patience when doubt surfaced,  
For smiling at the unrest that overtook my anxious feet,  
For guidance that walked me away from my mistakes,  
And for hands that pulled me out of the storms.

Yes, I owe her for these things—and many, many more.  
So no goodbyes, Momma. The love petals  
Falling like rain upon your grave  
Are mine—all mine.

## **“COME SING WITH ME”**

**By Gordon Parks**

Despite the turmoil, anguish and despair  
Disrupting the planet we inherited,  
There is something good I choose to sing about.  
That something lies within us, patiently waiting---  
Beneath us, above us and around us.

Its peaceful message yearns to fill  
Our places of murderous anger and hatred,  
To flourish forever.

Hope is the song I have chosen to sing---  
A deathless song, flowing steadily beside my faith.  
Whenever the fist of doubt knocks at my door,  
It is powerfully turned away by my hopeful singing.  
When things go from bad to worse I still sing my song.  
Why not?

It helps me endure the bloodthirsty days.  
Once earth's fire had devoured my hopes.  
As my twisted soul slid toward Hell,  
Fate came racing from another direction.  
Pinned to it was a belt of sun with new instructions.

These, it said, are for you! Suddenly fear was gone.  
I made peace with the mean roads I'd walked.  
My jackals could now lie down in truce.  
From that day on, I began singing the song called Hope.  
I still sing it loud---  
Above the waves, fire, darkness and mud.

***FROM THE HUGE SILENCE BY GORDON PARKS***

The prairie is still in me,  
in my talk and manners.  
I still sniff the air for rain or snow,  
know the loneliness of night,  
and distrust the wind  
when things get too quiet.  
Having been away so long  
and changed my face so often,  
I sometimes suspect that this place  
no longer recognizes me—  
despite these cowboy boots,  
this western hat and  
my father's mustache that I wear.  
To this place I must seem  
like wood from a different forest,  
and as secretive as black loam.  
This earth breathes uneasily under my boots.  
Their odor of city asphalt  
doesn't mix well with the clean smell  
of wild alfalfa and purple lovegrass.  
It puzzles me that I live so far away  
from our old clapboard house  
where, in oak tree shade,  
I used to sit and dream  
of what I wanted to become.  
I always return here weary,  
but to draw strength from  
This huge silence that surrounds me,  
knowing now that all I thought  
was dead here is still alive,  
that there is warmth here—  
even when the wind blows hard and cold.

## The First Bud

Through winter-locked and hungered days,  
And during trials of doubtful years,  
I walked mistaken roads searching for you.  
So when as you say during pillowtalk,

    You do not know me,  
    remember that I am you.

We have been one for thousands of years.

Our love is older than the sky.

That love tremored every windflow

While waiting to be summoned

By a cry, a moan from my heart

That was ablaze with loneliness.

Then, with the silence of a cloud,

It emerged through shadowless mist

    and, with pity,

Ripped my outraged soul apart,

Then strung it together with stars

That light your peaceful shade.

Now those nights

That were once without splendor

Dance in on wings that sing.

And the sound of rain

Falling on the roof is joyous.

## A Bottle's Worth of Tomorrow

Time slipped out of my house last night  
As I was bringing in the cat.  
Angry, worried, frowning,  
I went in search of it—  
Where it lay wrinkled and disgruntled  
Behind a stubborn door among thorns.  
I knocked and knocked;  
The door refused to open.  
Time, it finally said, is tired,  
And in need of a long rest.  
The hours it spent on you  
Were far too exhausting  
And moved much too slowly.  
Remember your running from sky to sky,  
With fog falling on you like fire?

The suit my soul wears  
Was growing threadbare.  
I had eaten salt for supper  
And been killed so many times.  
I was about to die some more  
when the stranger appeared,  
Asked me to wait, handed me a scrap of paper  
Then left as quietly as he had come.

He had scribbled his name: Tomorrow.  
Wait? Where? For how long?  
Distraught, I went toward home,  
Worried and frowning even more.  
Who was this fellow Tomorrow anyway,  
And where was he last night  
When time ran out on me?

Later I slept among bad memories.  
Having lived in the forest under my scalp,  
They knew me well; but I no longer knew them.  
I had drowned the worst in waves of skepticism.  
But when I awoke to let the cat out  
They were stirring inside me, moving as I moved.  
I opened the door—and there stood tomorrow,  
Grinning, with a sack full of sun, stars  
And a little bottle filled with a little more time.  
He dropped the sack and then hurried off.  
Content, at least for the moment,  
I gave a thankful sigh for those signs  
That had quietly walked out with my cat.  
But after a close look at that little bottle,  
It all became clear. No time was left  
    To wait for myself.  
I snatched a bunch of thoughts from the air,  
Then I too was off in a hurry.

## Homecoming

This small town into which I was born,  
has, for me, grown into the largest,  
and most important city in the universe.  
Fort Scott is not as tall, or heralded  
as New York, Paris, or London —  
or other places my feet have roamed,  
but it is home.

Surely I remember the harsh days,  
the sordid bigotry and segregated schools —  
and indeed the graveyard for Black people,  
(where my beloved mother and father  
still rest beneath Kansas earth).  
But recently, the bitterness,  
that hung around for so many years  
seems to have asked for silence, for escape  
from the weariness of those ugly days past.

Thankfully hatred is suddenly remaining quiet,  
Keeping its mouth shut! And I'm thankful  
For the contentment we lost along the way.  
My hope now is that each of us can find  
What GOD put us here to find — LOVE!  
Let us have no more truck with the devil!

## **“No Apologies” by Gordon Parks**

Fate holds no reason to frown at what Providence granted me.

My thanks remain uncountable.

After long talks with my past I now realize that life held a divine purpose,

For shoving me into places that were as changeable as the wind.

In between the floundering of then and now, the eyes of fate were following me --- watching, always watching with narrowing glances.

Now, having given deep thought to life's offerings,

I realize everything that happened should have happened.

So my heart lifts praise to a smiling autumn –

To those fallen years that no longer exist.

With this, and with no respite, I give thanks –

To each dawn,

To each night,

To all the falling and climbing that patiently carried me through unpredictable wanderings.

Crowned in the confusion that hammered my journey,

One golden thing stood: Love – serene love.

Nothing could banish love from my wilderness.