

Letter from Kamala Harris to Shirley Chisholm (Circa 2019)

I'm disappointed too.
 It wasn't your time then, and it isn't mine now.
 When I saw the crowds in Oakland,
 I didn't think it would be easy,
 But I thought it would be fair.
 So much for "hope and change," huh?

The prosecutor being put on trial,
 Always caught in the in-between:
 Between black Hillary and female Barack,
 Not quite hitting either mark.

Should I have shucked and jived my way to the Oval?
 I studied in the gem of Chocolate City! But who cares?
 'Cause I chose a vanilla husband.
 One minute I'm the flip-floppin' cop,
 Next minute I'm the integrationist who's "gone too far."

I know, I know—
 I panicked.
 I flinched.
 I caved.
 But can you blame me?

It was my Negro Wake Up call.
 The same one Barack had after he "realized" Dr. King's dream.
 The same one Meghan had, you know,
 When she realized she wasn't the Sally to her Harry,
 At least according to the press.
 Same press that fawns over the white B-boys,
 But wouldn't give Cory the time of day.

So yeah, I backpedaled. I played the game.
 But it wasn't enough.
 When will it be enough?
 When will *we* be enough?
 When will we win *their* game?
 Will the people ever choose us—
 Unbossed and unbought?

Please,
 Let's hope Stacey gets her fair fight.

Under the Weeping Willow

In the haze of a Selma morning,
I can feel the trees breathe with anticipation.

Dewy, black earth threatens to sink me,
In the circle of bones
And flags dripping with blood
And blue, star-studded crosses.

I step into the center.
Here lies Forrest;
No, not the one played by Tom Hanks,
—a patriotic, loving everyman,
But his namesake:

“Nathan Bedford Forrest,” reads his plaque.
It continues,

“Self-made millionaire through various business ventures”
including the plunder of Black lives, from cradle to grave
“His wealth would be used...in the war effort against the North”
shackling the bodies that gave him his freedom
“Displayed an uncanny ability at war”
slaying hundreds of Black Union troops waving the white flag

I can't help but linger
On the pesky details left unwritten:

A man so brave, he cloaked himself
With ivory sheets and burning crosses
To conduct his hateful wizardry—

Treacherous, malignant blue blood.

Turning away from the plaque, I'm caught by his statue.
As Forrest's withering eyes pierce mine,
One image burns itself in my mind:

His sons marching in the name of Lee, Davis,
And other rebel brethren
In the streets of Charlottesville,
Long after his daughters erected his statue
To blur the line between dissent and disloyalty.

Returning to the world of dilapidated houses
And cracked roads, I slip back into myself.
As I let go, willow leaves fade to grey;
Their branches weighed down
By the ghosts of a Lost Cause.

For Clytemnestra

It's the same story isn't it?
 He left you, just like he left me
 To chase after a prize withheld,
 A dream deferred,
 A diamond glittering,
 A glory that forever eludes him

After being beaten with so many sticks,
 One would ask, "Was the carat even worth it?"
 And yet...
 He demands you sacrifice
 Yourself, your family, your labor
 To pay for his already lost cause

Worst of all, this script isn't even written by him;
 It's written by the gods, the masters,
 Whether they be on a mountain or plantation
 They'll always put another twist in the prophecy
 Another devil lurking in the fine print
 Of your destiny

Here we are, slaves of a different kind:
 You to the royal house, and me to the fields
 Yet we're the same, aren't we?

Our resentment
 Our righteousness
 Our rage at his audacity

Our grief, our loneliness
 All forgotten to his lusty affairs
 When he returns, our beloved Hero

Vaunting over a victory
 That never belonged to him,
 Trading one plunder for another

And here we stand:
 Wearing necessity's yoke
 Biding time to free ourselves

From hypocrisy, fate, and a love lost
 To the ravages of war
 Until then,

We dote on valor
 We sing our praises
 We pray justice leads him on a crimson path

Discourse and Debate

“I don’t know if I should say this, but—”

Then don’t.
Please don’t.

“shouldn’t [insert ethnic minority] take *some* responsibility for _____?”

No—

No one ever ignores the warning shot.
I see how this “conversation” ends
before it even begins:

The trepidation in my professor’s sweaty brow,
soon replaced by resignation
for the arguments that’ll bombard lecture.

The chocolate in my neighbor’s eyes
morphs into fiery amber
thanks to sweet, righteous indignation.

And me?
I sink into my wooden chair,
as I feel my scholarship being wasted

every... second... he... speaks.

Yes, him—
donning North Face in navy blue,
a golden Apple at his wrist,
his sixth set of Sperry shoes,
and a smug smirk,

Executing every tactic in the
Devil’s Advocate’s Playbook:

1. **M**ake assertions without citations
2. **A**ssuage TAs with mild backpedaling
3. **G**oad dissenters with ad hominem attacks
4. **A**ccuse others of small-minded censorship

Oh, and he yanks at our heartstrings too
by informing us his parents are getting divorced,
so we can’t stay mad at him

When he offends our delicate sensibilities
with braggadocio veiled as patriotism.

No theories by Du Bois, no histories by Coates,
no stories by Hurston nor Morrison
could yield his surrender,

because surrender means retraction

because surrender means submission

because surrender means invalidation.

Entrenched in his oppression,
ready to strike anyone who calls him
“nativist” in lieu of “nationalist”

He’s already sharpened every word in his lexicon
like a bayonet; his rhetoric as loaded as an AR-15.

each weapon cracks the overton window wide open.

Let him give his spirited defense of Social Darwinism
(though he would never call it that),

in the name of fairness and balance

in the name of intellectual exercise

in the name of discourse.

I mean, who doesn’t love a vigorous debate?

Dear Mr. Black and Blue,

How does it feel
to play the villain
of both sides of the story?

To be casted as
the Black bastard?

How do you wear
a badge on your chest,
knowing it won't shield you
from the target on your back?

Taking aim from
your skinfolk
and your kinfolk,

For whom will you bite
the bullet?

For whom do you have
a duty to intervene?

Do you even know who to root for?
Who to tag team in this one-v-one?

How do you spectate
the melee between
your father and sons
and your brothers-in-arms?

The same arms could easily
fire against your beating heart,
filled to bursting with Black blood—

But maybe yours runs blue instead.

Which shade do you see in the mirror?
Which color can you bleach away?

How long will you hang
as the golden apple,
when the roots have long rotted?
When the orchard is dying?

Come back to earth.

Signed,
Young Woman

Dear Baby Girl,

Why
are you
screaming now?

*Sincerely,
Officer B.B.*

keratin trees: a cycle**I. Forest Africana**

“We’re almost done, baby.”
 Roots resisted as Mama’s great hands
 tugged them together.
 Pain seared through the unmoisturized soil.
 Her toothy rake combed my Cameroonian
 forest of fiber and frizz.
 Blades sheared split ends.
 Her calloused hands slathered coconut oil
 and bound wild kinks into some manageability.
 I sighed, hoping
 four hours of toil were worth it.

II. Seasonal Clearing

“Aye— hold still.”
 I couldn’t help it. My fingers gripped
 the edges of the carpet. Not even
 Hannah Montana could distract me
 from Mama detangling knotty vines.
 Every three months, she plants
 new, off-black trees— Brazil
 I think they’re from. But first,
 the old ones must come down.
 Let my forest floor breathe raw.
 Another yank from Mama’s rake had me squealing.

III. Slash and Burn

“Tell me when it hurts.”
 No imported plants this time.
 Instead, Mama tried a new fertilizer— “perm”
 I think it’s called. The white paste burnt like hell, more than
 any rake-pulling ever could.
 My follicles were scorched and screaming.
 But I wanted my spirals to stand
 as straight as mighty oaks.
 To look like the stems my friends grew.
 To be almost normal.

IV. Deforestation

The fertilizer wore off. My tresses were
 taking too long to grow. Nappy leaves kept
 breaking off. Nine-year-old me felt
 it was time to clear the land. Stealing Mama’s blades, I
 scavenged the forest myself.
 Kinks piled up in a plastic bag, as I chopped
 vines and blossoms alike.
 I thought it was a masterpiece. Mama disagreed.
 We went to the salon to plant new trees.

V. Reforestation

“Turn your head.”
 I caught Big Sis’s eyes in the mirror as she
 assessed the damage of my neglect.
 Too much of herself in me, I guess.
 She too couldn’t help but compare hers to
 the golden and ginger flora in *Teen Vogue*.
 Sis took the worst turn with Mama’s blades
 but her forest grew back eventually.
 I still wonder what would’ve happened
 if we both left our forests untouched.
 Big Sis gave me some reassurance:

 Ours are the only ones that grow toward the sun.

The Scream

Inspired by "Aaaah!", a piece from Art X Social Justice's "Stories in Paper," an exhibit produced by incarcerated artists

She's a perfect fragment
 in this chaotic collage.
 An embodiment of pure ache or ecstasy,
 depending on the camera angle.
 Though she tops the frame,
 she remains the center of attention.
 Crimson curtain says she's center stage,
 but no sight of an audience.
 Perhaps she holds *us* captive
 with her siren song.
 What do you hear when gazing at
 her shimmering form? When gazing at
 rose gold glowing against
 her mocha physique,
 her outstretched arms—
 What are her hands doing anyway, cut
 out of her frame like that?
 Are they clenched into fists?
 Or loose in longing? In bliss?
 Don't let it distract you from
 her eyes closed shut,
 her mouth wide open— as if she were singing
 to heaven and hell alike, and
 her hymn echoing in white abyss.
 May we liken her to a Muse,
 in lieu of a siren?
 May she compare to sweet Aphro?
 Is her melody of love or anguish?
 A ballad of peace or unrest?
 Would her voice shatter her glass box
 as if it were a ceiling? To where
 would her words take wing?
 To where would *she* take flight?
 Is she being dragged down?
 Or rising from the ground,
 born from the ashes of bone and bronze?
 Is she blooming atop a hill?
 No, a hill wouldn't do her justice.
 She's cresting a mountain
 of riches never meant to be hers.



Wet Morning in Montgomery

In 2018, the Equal Justice Initiative opened the F U.S. memorial dedicated to lynchings perpetrated post-Civil War.

January 15, 2020—

Reading under a shaded garden

On a certain King's birthday,

"_____ Cromwell, May 28, 1880."

"George Briscoe, November 26, 1884."

Mr. C died on my birthday.

Mr. B died in my beloved border state.

Two of (at least) six thousand slain.

Bronze pillars holding their stories weigh heavy

Over my head, as if I were to be crushed by

their screams, their tears, their terrors.

Like captive gladiators dragged into the lion's den,

The melanated men probably stared dead

Into the volatile sea of pitchforks and golden badges.

How gleefully did the vigilantes jeer? How arresting were the show trials?

Did the accused even resist? Or was pleading guilty easiest?

Then again, how would we know?

Can't find clippings from *The Post* advertising such bloodsport.

(papers probably torched for pyres)

Perhaps Mr. C and Mr. B never got such fanfare,

But I know others did—

too many pictures, too many postcards, too many cities,

too many Emmetts, Trayvons, and _____

Mr. C and Mr. B etch their names in the back of my eyes

As clouds glaze over them. Rain fails to mask

Teardrops cascading down my face,

Soaking my flushed skin, threatening to drown me.

Time collapses and the ocean separating me

From the men shrinks to a mere pond.

Terror and relief brew a hurricane, engulfing me in

the mercy of my ancestors not being shackled to Uncle Sam's ships,

the mercy of not being born as goods to be sold separately,

the mercy of my folks not coming here a generation sooner,

maybe we still came a generation too soon...

what the conch said to the black child

Inspired by Charles White's "Sound of Silence" (1978)

we're quite different,
you and I.

sure, you rugged on the outside
and smooth on the inside,

maybe we can even pull
a pearl outta you too.

but you not hollow on the inside,
not whitewashed on the outside.

erosion is not your destiny,
no matter the lies society tells.

your bones don't belong to the sea,
no matter what history yells.

unlike me,
you always existed

to be more than the market's currency,
to be more than an exotic accessory,
to be more than a herald of tragedy.

before they plunder your pearl,
harvest your flesh from inside out,
and play you to the beat of their symphony,

Remember:

you are no husk left behind.



Madeleine, la femme noire

Inspired by Marie-Guillemine Benoist's "Portrait d'une négresse" (1800)

Your eyes. Who could ignore
the quiet contempt in your eyes?
Surely, Mistress B never intended
to capture such intensity— likely
mistook it for cool indifference.
Just as she mistook your acquiescence
for affinity, your compliance
for comradery, and your silence
for solidarity. As if her struggle
could ever mirror yours.

Stroke after stroke, Mistress rendered
your face blank and your body allegory
pour la Révolution,
pour la République.

Enrobed in ivory like Plato,
but black bosom bared—
What else will nourish us,
when flesh is on offer?

Modesty maintained in a navy shawl
and a covered crown. To tame your wild mane,
Mistress must've considered the liberty cap,
but irony (or foresight) prevented its presence.

A token of "la sororité," the bloody sash bound you
as tightly as a corset. Yet its hue ripened
memories of brethren singing to an ouverture
disparate from the rhythm of Marseille.

When donning the shades of the Metropole,
did you ever miss the vibrance of your childish isle?
Or did you yearn for a native land stolen from you
as you were stolen from her?

Will you ever know home? She, like freedom,
is fleeting in its stability, infinitely adrift
in a sea of codes, commands, and conquests,
forever ephemeral to your existence.

Be grateful, Maddie. Lest you become an ornament. Again.

Non, *Marie*— Si tu étais vivante aujourd'hui,
tu m'appelleras une reine Nubienne.
Je n'étais jamais "une esclave" ou "une négresse."
Rappelle: un mot n'est pas la personne.



Monday Lecture

Men fight amongst themselves upon Earth's crust
 Again in the ancient tale that itself repeats
 A thousand times in a thousand cities. Do we know
 The tale's tempo & beats like the work of a clock?
 Truth spins, twists, and contorts in class,
 Isolating us from our own history.

Lecture drones on about how all history
 Is bound to land. I consider the Earth's crust
 As grey clouds break open outside of class,
 An omen of how our blue marble's cycle repeats
 From drought to wildfire. A geological clock
 Pundits never cared to know.

What does it mean to "know"
 The red soil grounding our history?
 I gaze wistfully at the broken clock,
 Wondering if the upper crust
 Believe their canopy of lies, repeating
 How conquest is a sign of class.

Education is the sign of class,
 I'm always told. But what does it mean to know?
 To only absorb national myths sung and repeated?
 To only skim your preferred histories
 Without excavating beyond the surface, the crust
 Of the text? Protests buried, only witnessed by clock.

Why are such details lost to all but the clock?
 Can we en masse stop the upper class
 From erasing the pillaging of planet's crust,
 The slaughter we've always known
 From ever-burning pages of history,
 In self-destruction which forever repeats?

Alternative facts Prof unknowingly repeats
 As Time bends and curves over the clock.
 Remember; demagogues rewrite our history.
 Dogma enforced upon the lower classes
 Warps victims into the villains we know
 A reality as stable as pie crust.

They often say history itself repeats.
 But why? Are we cursed by Earth's crust & clock,
 Doomed to doze in class and never know?

When the Black Pope Debated a Skeleton

Inspired by Charles White's "Black Pope (Sandwich Board Man)" (1973)

SKELETON:

You can't ignore me, can you?
 Me, the dangling specter brought
 courtesy of Olympus, as you profess
 Hope, Truth, Justice, or whatever virtues
 your Almighty deems sacred. You pray
 your savior will beat the Goliath that is
their Lord, huh? The one on the dollar bill,
 the pledge, the belt, shielding the very sinners
 against the faith pumping and thumping
 through your veins. No arc will save you,
 not even the universe's. Nobody pays mind
 to the little protest on your chest,
 the unburnt cross on your crown,
 or your windy city careening into a valley
 of ash and brimstone.

Until the fire... burns... out.

POPE:

Son, they ain't members of my congregation, so they
 Ain't receiving the word. They do the sign of the cross,
 While ignoring my sign of peace. **THAT** is my protest.
 Blessed are the ignorant, truly,
 but blessed more are folks laying down their lives
 for liberation instead of libations.
 With Charlie fighting Charlie and babies meeting bullets,
 The distance between christening and collapse
 keeps
 shrinking.
 And red keeps flooding
 the street,
 the block,
 the city,
 the nation.

Our cup has never runneth over.



Sermon on Pennsylvania Avenue

Blessed are those who seek liberation in lieu of libations
for you supplicate not before the god of gradualism

Woe to the tired lambs who dream others as "sheeple"
for your shepherd hastens you to the abattoir

Blessed are those who refuse tyranny 'guised as civility
for you resist the talking heads and spineless suits

Woe to the ripe apples in an orchard decayed
for you will be devoured in the name of justice

Blessed are the unheard but never voiceless
for you throw sweet Molotovs to the window Overton

Woe to the minority who declares itself a majority silenced
for you mask your monied privilege as righteous bravery

Blessed are the 99%, living labor from tip to stimulus
for your blood fuels machines artifice yet essential

Woe to the jealous who leech off neighbors beneath
for you've succumbed to the profiteering prophets

Mercy to the children whose laughter bursts wholeheartedly
for your souls have yet been stained by corporate madness

Mercy to the children living and dying by the anthem
for your creed loves you not as you love her

