

Poetry of Resistance: Imagining the Overthrow of Capitalist Oppression

by Lauren Schmidt

[NOTE: This essay was originally a presentation to a panel with the same title at the Left Forum in New York City, May 31 2015. It was sponsored by the National Writers Union. Other panelists that day were Lora Tucker, Raymond Nat Turner, and Martín Espada.]

When I was fourteen years old, I took a book from my high school English teacher's shelf, *An Anthology of American Negro Poetry*, a book that would introduce me to the poet who made me want to be a poet: Paul Laurence Dunbar. Before reading Dunbar and a number of poets in that anthology who would influence me as a writer—Langston Hughes and Lucille Clifton chief among them—I had read poets I was supposed to love but never did: William Wordsworth Longfellow, Emily Dickinson, T.S. Eliot. It was Dunbar's poem, "My Sort o' Man" that made me say to myself, "If that's what poetry can do, I want to be a poet."

My Sort of Man

I don't believe in 'ristercrats
An' never did, you see;
The plain ol' homelike sorter folks
Is good enough fur me.
O' course, I don't desire a man
To be too tarnal rough,
But then, I think all folks should know
When they air nice enough.

Now there is folks in this here world,
From peasant up to king,
Who want to be so awful nice
They overdo the thing.
That's jest the thing that makes me sick,
An' quicker 'n a wink
I set it down that them same folks
Ain't half so good 's you think.

I like to see a man dress nice,
In clothes becomin' too;
I like to see a woman fix
As women orter to do;
An' boys an' gals I like to see
Look fresh an' young an' spry.--
We all must have our vanity
An' pride before we die.

But I jedge no man by his clothes,--
Nor gentleman nor tramp;
The man that wears the finest suit
May be the biggest scamp,
An' he whose limbs air clad in rags
That make a mournful sight,
In life's great battle may have proved
A hero in the fight.

I don't believe in 'ristercrats;
I like the honest tan
That lies upon the healthful cheek
An' speaks the honest man;
I like to grasp the brawny hand
That labor's lips have kissed,
For he who has not labored here
Life's greatest pride has missed:

The pride to feel that yore own strength
Has cleaved fur you the way
To heights to which you were not born,
But struggled day by day.
What though the thousands sneer an' scoff,
An' scorn yore humble birth?
Kings are but puppets; you are king
By right o' royal worth.

The man who simply sits an' waits
Fur good to come along,
Ain't worth the breath that one would take
To tell him he is wrong.

Fur good ain't flowin' round this world
Fur every fool to sup;
You 've got to put yore see-ers on,
An' go an' hunt it up.

Good goes with honesty, I say,
To honour an' to bless;
To rich an' poor alike it brings
A wealth o' happiness.
The 'ristercrats ain't got it all,
Fur much to their su'prise,
That's one of earth's most blessed things
They can't monopolize.

Dunbar's poem sings the praises of everyday people, people who work, who know the satisfaction that comes with work, the integrity and honor that comes with work. His poem denounces the notion that wealthy people are any more deserving of joy, and even boldly suggests that though the "ristercrats" appear to have what everyone wants, they often lack the virtues he lists throughout his poem: honesty, pride, strength, and endurance.

To those who care to listen, Dunbar's poem still resonates today, in this social, political, and economic climate. It was during our most recent Presidential election when Mitt Romney was caught saying his infamous lines about the 47%. What I have always found difficult to reconcile is the fact that there are many politicians who rely on social issues for their platform, things like abortion and gay marriage, and they often purport to uphold strong Christian values, yet their political decision-making rarely aligns with them. Here is a poem of mine that attempts to expose that kind of hypocrisy, too often seen in our political system.

Unto Others

To the roomful of people at the private fundraiser for Mitt Romney, May 2012

"There are 47 percent who are with [the President], who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe that government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you name it.... That's entitlement."

—Mitt Romney

"All things therefore whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye also unto them."

—Matthew 7:12

Who there knows how good it is to know
a warm bed and a roof? If any, speak.

Who there knows how good it is to know
a schoolroom? If any, speak.

Who there knows how good it is to know
the stiffness of new shoes? If any, speak.

Who there knows how good it is to know
the steam of a meal on your cheeks? If any, speak.

Who there knows how good it is to know
some God hears you weep? If any, speak.

Who there knows how good it is to know?
All of you know, so speak.

Say you know how good it is to know.
All of you know, so speak. Say it's OK

for others to know how good it is to know.
Say it. Speak. You lose nothing

if others know how good it is to know.
Go ahead. Speak.

If you know how good it is to know,
why then don't you speak?

Why then don't you speak?
Say something. Speak. Speak. Speak.

As important as it is to write poems that comment on issues of social justice, we can't stop there. We have to do everything we can to put our principles into practice, to live our values; otherwise, our poetry will be as empty as our politicians' rhetoric. The next poem is part of a series based on my experience volunteering at a transitional housing program for homeless mothers and their children. Like all the poems in this series, this one attempts to humanize some of the most vulnerable women in our society, and to inspire more compassion and empathy to counteract the judgement these women often face.

Welfare Mothers

The Haven House for Women and Children

LaQuita was chewing her cuticles when I noticed how thin she had become, so careworn and thin. This afternoon, her face was not its usual honey-gold, but gray—her hips thin, wrists thin, all over thin. I asked her if she'd eaten today, and with pink-rimmed eyes fixed on her fingers she shook her head.

I pulled eight singles from my jeans, bills as soft and worn as used tissues, and held them out for her to take to the Wawa at the corner. She held the money in a stiff gaze, but did not move until I took her wrist, pressed the slim fold in her palm, and closed her fingers around it. She returned with two bagels, a convenience store coffee,

a cherry Gatorade, a plastic knife, and one small cup of cream cheese. I waited for the honey to return to her face as she ate and ate and ate. With the last lump of food still stuffed inside her cheek, LaQuita approached to give me a wrinkled Wawa receipt and drop a dime, a nickel, and two pennies in my hand.

And finally, because I use my poetry to imagine a new and more just world, I will close with a poem from my first collection, *Psalms of The Dining Room*, a sequence of poems written about my volunteer work experience at a soup kitchen in Eugene, Oregon. It is in no small part inspired by Martín Espada's poem, "Imagine the Angels of Bread."

Manny

For Manny and all other visitors of The Dining Room, Eugene, Oregon, 2009

Manny got a job today. After nine months of pushing peas around his plate, eyes he could not bear to lift, Manny got a job today. Then this could be

the day the burns on Berta's arm iron out and tighten, the day her butterfly fingers separate from the cocoon of cells that swathes them. This could be the day she pulls her shirt over her shoulder, lengthens her limb through the sleeve with ease, extends the crook, fused in a melted web of skin, so she no longer smuggles her arm in the belly of her shirt as if to soothe an ache. This could be

the day the rot in Rico's leg dries its vast jungle,
the day the claw of red ripped skin releases its grip
in the heart-shaped carve of his calf, the day
his cane is used for dancing. This could be

the day the scourge of sores on Salena's lips
seal shut, the day the yellow-green scabs flake away
and her moldy breath sweetens. This could be

the day the fear coiled in Doyle's mind lifts
like smoke rings and fades, the day he forgets
his wife's bones he put above a fire. This could be

the day Jay's machine-gun gibberish becomes prayer
or poetry, praise, or warning, the day the tank in his throat
cranks its belts into the soft pulses of a baritone,
the day he learns to sing. This could be

the day the scar that halves Marva's face unzips,
the day her albino eye flushes its gray and glimmers,
warm with brown and sight again, the day the right side
of her face sits on the throne of her skull, the day
the Z in her spine straightens. This could be

the day the spectacle of Kenneth's gender is quelled,
the day she learns to carry asymmetric breasts
and pack away her penis, the day God is merciful
and stuffs him into the purse of a body he was not
born into but wears around his shoulder. This could be

the day everyone lifts their glasses. Manny got a job today.
The day silver stays in drawers and napkins, folded away.
The day there's more than enough for seconds. Manny got a job today.
The day the doors are boarded up, the day the *Closed* sign is hung,
Manny got a job today. Yes, Manny got a job today.