

**Mirror, Not Movie Screen: Getting Personal Through Persona Poetry**  
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**adam thinking**

she  
stolen from my bone  
is it any wonder  
i hunger to tunnel back  
inside desperate  
to reconnect the rib and clay  
and to be whole again

some need is in me  
struggling to roar through my  
mouth into a name  
this creation is so fierce  
i would rather have been born

**eve thinking**

it is wild country here  
brothers and sisters coupling  
claw and wing  
groping one another

i wait  
while the clay two-foot  
rumbles in his chest  
searching for language to

call me  
but he is slow  
tonight as he sleeps  
i will whisper into his mouth  
our names

~ Lucille Clifton

## Signifying

*York's hatchet*

When my onyx captain means biz-ness,  
when he feel threatened  
he don't reach for nothin' small 'n pretty  
he don't bother fumblin'  
with no powderhorn 'n ball neither.

When the choices be life o' death  
he know he need a steel tooth killer like me  
that know nothin' 'bout no ticklin'  
or caressin'. Gentle ain't never been my song.

When a grizzly need to be stopped  
dead in his tracks, already fulla hot lead  
an madder for it, he gone reach fo' me  
t' silence his gapin' mouth 'n angry tone.

He gone ask my steel kiss t' cleave an gash  
t' hew an chop like lightnin' strikes.

He gone want me t' get loud 'n mean  
to unlock that monster's skull  
t' run my tongue 'cross his brain, t' burrow  
through his ribcage 'til I can taste his heart

t' fill the air with blood 'n guts  
'til dere ain't nothin' left  
but a bear skin 'n a pile a steaks.

Ya see, killas only respect killas  
neva nothin' weak 'n shiny  
neva nothin' that hide 'n spit atcha  
from behind trees  
from fifty paces 'n maybe tear  
a lil' hole in ya flesh.

Nah, killin' is what we do  
'n the reason he sleep with his fingers  
'round my throat.

~ Frank X Walker

## **Cutting Back**

*York's knife*

Thunder might spook a horse,  
but lightning is the knife that strikes.  
Death is never as simple  
as that loud-mouthed hatchet makes it out to be.

He's just extra weight  
when there's no killing to be done.  
Big dumb clumsy chopping  
doesn't require thought or skill.

A blade can cut down a bear or a tree or a man,  
but what else can it do?  
It can't skin a buffalo  
or change its wooly back into rawhide.

It's useless when York needs to scale and clean a fish  
or lance a wound.  
It might hack off a piece of meat  
but can it peel the skin off a piece of fruit?

Size means nothing when the right vein  
and the blood that courses through it need separating.  
I can take the hair off a man's throat or slice it open  
without raising my voice.

These fools sit around the fires all night  
pining for the love of a good woman.  
And they believe a good woman  
is always quiet and small and pretty.

But they aren't ready for a real one like me,  
who is as dangerous and useful in the wild  
as fire is in the kitchen.

~ Frank X Walker

## freedom

freedom is what you can buy with a song. after the song has been soldered into your lungs. after the song has beaten its way inside your dreams, after the song has snuck its way into your bed. after the song has festered and blossomed and festered again. after the song has stolen your fingers and robbed your voice blind. after all this, you try to sell the song that can never be sold. you end up with your hand out, waiting for the words that spell freedom.

freedom is every dirt road ground into whiskey still of my voice, my backpocket buck knife sharpening silence, coiled up close to copperhead, dime and dollar bill, the price of a pint and the slow violence of a victrola spittin' bessie's blues. freedom is my baby's snakeoil slide of dreadnaught guitar standing hard in darkened dayroom corners. freedom lurches in and out of my life heavy as the swollen secret of a noose.

## leadbelly writes home, 1934

martha:

lomax is carpetbagger  
to the core.  
truth slides itself  
slicked up and sideways  
out his mouth,  
dressed up in the way  
he wants to see the world.

so i let him brag on  
how "he freed me"  
'cause the fastest way  
to a white man's heart  
is through is lies,  
the fastest way out  
of his grace  
is truth.

**martha promise receives leadbelly, 1935**

when your man comes home from prison,  
when he comes back like the wound  
and you are the stitch,  
when he comes back with pennies in his pocket  
and prayer fresh on his lips,  
you got to wash him down first.

you got to have the wildweed and treebark boiled  
and calmed, waiting for his skin like a shining baptism  
back into what he was before gun barrels and bars  
chewed their claim in his hide and spit him  
stumbling backwards into screaming sunlight.

you got to scrub loose the jailtime fingersmears  
from ashy skin, lather down the cuffmarks  
from ankle and wrist, rinse solitary's stench loose  
from his hair, scrape curse and confession  
from the welted and the smooth,  
the hard and the soft,  
the furrowed and the lax.

you got to hold tight that shadrach's face  
between your palms, take crease and lid  
and lip and brow and rinse slow with river water,  
and when he opens his eyes  
you tell him calm and sure  
how a woman birthed him  
back whole again.

## **mistress stella speaks**

you think i'm his property  
'cause he paid cash  
to grab me by the neck,  
swing me 'cross his knee  
and stroke the living song from my hips.

you think he is a master of all  
my twelve tongues, spreading notes  
thick as a starless night, strangling spine  
till my voice is a jungle of chords.

the truth is that i owned him  
since the word love first blessed his lips  
since hurt and flight and free  
carved their way into the cotton  
fused bones of his fretting hand,  
since he learned how pleading men hunt  
for my face in the well of their throats  
till their tongues are soaked with want.

yes, each day he comes back  
home from the fields,  
from chain gang fury,  
from the smell of sometime women  
who borrow his body. he bends  
his weight around me  
like a wilting weed,  
drinking in my kiss  
of fretboard across fingertip  
'til he can stand up straight again,  
aching from what he left behind,  
rising sure as dawn.

~ Tyehimba Jess

## The Magician's Assistant

The first night he sawed me in half  
I expected a trick -- another girl

huddled in the stage-left end  
of the polished cabinet,

waiting to poke out her toes  
while I smiled, unworried,

from the opposite side.  
Once we both were clear, I imagined,

he'd lift the rhinestone-handled saw  
and slice the air between us,

faking the work it would take  
to cut through a body.

But then he opened the golden lid  
and there wasn't a trick, wasn't

a girl. Just pine boards,  
splintered and bare. All the same,

when he took my hand  
I climbed in. I'd seen his act

over and over, other chicks  
in the same short sequined dress,

smiling at their own feet  
from across the stage. As tricks go

it's hardly rare - we've all cheered  
a man who wouldn't be sated

with a single cut, who'd slice a woman  
in half, then halve each half again.

How did I grin through that pain?  
A wave of his wand

and I was whole again. Scarless.  
I didn't ask how. Six nights a week

for two years, he broke me apart,  
put me together. Just like new,

he bragged -- never pausing  
even once to look -- then took his bow.

~ Philip Memmer