Cheryl Clarke

TARGETS
History

i.

‘When an incident occurs like the Mike Brown police murder, black people see history: slavery, the betrayal of Reconstruction, Jim Crow, Plessy, Lynch Law, segregation, Mississippi goddamn. Cops see only the one event,’ says a venerable white historian.

(Cops see history too; the history of their racist rationalizations).

Both act accordingly.

Cops bring down the brutal force of the state upon the black person—man or woman.

We try to run like hell.

ii.

If there was one story I had the power of prerogative to change—besides the 2016 presidential election—Billie Holiday’s is the one. Every time I listen to her sing one of those droll tunes she made art, I ask, ‘Why’d you have to take yourself down that drain, baby girl? Your baby voice and cool knowledge. Why? You had everything.

The answers are not in our stars, baby girl, only in legend of your leg atop shabby dressing room vanity trying to get a good vein.
iii.
President Obama takes to Twitter. His followers tweet:
‘WELCOME TO TWITTER, NIGG—’

iv.
While I can casually dismiss having had
an affair with a married (straight) woman, I will never forget
Louise, long black hair whipped back into a ponytail
like Billie in the late fifties and a fabulous, extravagant sense of humor and love of
cannabis that sent my inexperienced mind and me into an orbit of nonsense and theater
that nearly ended or at least ruined my life. There I was on that fated morning
left with the husband, Billy, downstairs shouting up at me:
‘Tell Louise to come out of that apartment this minute
or I’m going to break this door in.’ And Billy did, and Louise ran out past him to her
Pontiac and drove out of my life. Police no match for the tall elegance in gray suit and
his straight black male desperation to follow Louise
with .38 protruding hard against his trouser pocket.
I admired his resistance—in spite of myself—for the way the pigs jumped back.

‘Wait a minute, buddy,’ they say weakly as they fall back onto their squad car.

‘You wait, you cops. Don’t you buddy me,’ Billy snaps.

The cops later pronounced the event ‘a tiff between the boyfriend and the girlfriend.’

v.
I can still recall that desire. Walking out onto my street to meet her as she left from
her Pontiac, the seat of many rendezvous. We see each other a block away. Laughter
of recognition. Each moseying to the other, heads and hips cocked. On their way to
Point Pleasant, friends pass me in their car grunting ‘Um-hum’ at the resonant certainty
of our kinesis.

Her fitted linen dress, bare legs, high heels, and brief-less.
Me: boxer shorts, tank top, Converse high tops, bra-less.
On Their Way to Life

i.

#Sandra Bland

a fly black girl brown skin and open brown face, anything but bland—even in that mug shot and orange jump suit on your way to life by way of Prairie View, Texas, now joining the long list of infamous sites where unarmed black death thrives in cop custody if you’re changing lanes and smoking a cigarette at the same time (but check it out: a fly black girl smoking a cigarette brown skin open brown face—even when pissed after telling you to dump your smoke brags ‘I’ll light you up’ and drags you from your car like lynching, except you were in custody though not convinced of its lawfulness:

‘You’re gonna arrest me for changing a lane?’

ii.

leaving Chicago

Mamie Till knew quite a bit about lynching. After crow-barring open that coffin saw the telltale ring, and, as she claimed, felt over every inch of what was left of Little Man’s body, dredged up from Money, Mississippi. (Black people get lynched over cigars, cigarettes, cigarillos, whistling, loud music, loud talk, back talk, praying, running, defective tail lights, toy guns, hoodies, and their own damned wallets.)

Don’t be black and coming from Chicago and traveling South you may not stand the storm if you’re a sassy black teenager whistling or a fly black girl smoking and unused to taking low to nonsense—even fatal nonsense. Better to stay with the extreme temperatures of your Midwest Metropole than to cross the median in a Texas prairie town or a Mississippi delta.

iii.

#Botham Shem Jean from St. Lucia

Always good in math
On your way to life in Dallas, Texas
Botham Shem Jean
Minding your own business
In your own apartment after your day’s accounting work is done
When a white girl punk gun-happy off-duty cop thinks you are in hers
Bursts in on you
Watching tv in your own apartment--
And shoots you in the torso.

Were you standing, sitting,
Or slid to the floor
Before
She realizes
She’s not in her apartment
And
You aren’t in her apartment either?

Targets

North Miami—or any part of Miami for that matter
remember Liberty City, 1980, Arthur McDuffie—
P’D snipers finishing target-practicing on mug shots
—some as old as 15 years—of black male subjects
when an unsuspecting upstanding clarinetist Sgt.
of the Florida Army National Guard Band enters
with her fellow Guardspersons for ‘weapons qualification
training’ and sees—amidst hulking white bodies bulked up with tats
short-sleeve tees tight levis cowboy boots baseball football trucker caps
and—whaddaya know—hoodies—her brother’s image amongst other targets scored
with bullets—complains poignantly of ‘hits’ in his head and eye,
declares: ‘That’s not his life, now. He’s a father. He’s a husband.
He’s a career man. He works a 9-5.’
The slight male night nurse, youngish, maybe gay, strong as a bull, who felt my chill hands, commenting, 'Boy, your hands are cold' —I think of him often. I didn't give a damn about cold hands. 30 minutes later he returns with two large white towels, folded tunnel-like. Placing the terry-cloth heaps on my lap, he implored, 'Here, put your hands in these, they're warm.' I did, and they were. He had heated them. Several hours later, he asked my permission, gave me a sponge bath, and changed and dated the bandage on the chest incision: '4/12.'

4/10: Type A, 'ascending,' a serious condition requiring emergency open heart surgery—immediately. It's an emergency. 98% mortality. 2 cases out of 10,000 in the country. 24 to 48 hours to live once occurring. Sharp chest pain (not unlike acid reflux) Leg numbness. Aortic dissection or aneurism. Six-inch incision between my breasts, sawing of the breastbone. Surgeon must be able to insert his hand into heart region. After six hours, coronary bypass for another six.

4/20: 12 hours matched only by the 12 hour post-surgery car journey from Southside Chicago to Eastern Shore Maryland. Awake for the latter in the back seat of a rental Chevy, clutching pillow to chest, bracing in case of sudden braking.
What It Takes: Song of Longing II

a whole bag of cannabis
to conjure
a dusky
song of longing:
closed eyes of a euro, yoruban singing:
‘i been ‘urt so many times before.’
live in anaheim post 9/11
what it takes?

a closet dream
of oblique memory of evanescence
of atlantic confluence at the cape
what it takes?

what it takes is
hybrid beach
rough
dangerous
choking
of speed I’ve never got
to afraid or just not
gifted enough
and beggar what’s left
for the precocious sway
of her
of party halls.
tobacco
smoke-flow
tossed cellophane white flecks
on green
hexagons
what it takes?
I knew what I was about stroking your lovely neck in the perilously brief interval at the intersection of desire, the real, and feminist derring-do.

And if the intersection is three or four points of variance, divergence, diversion, aversion, and hapless brief interval larger than the grid, in dread of a walled corner, a piano stool, a contraband .38, and that flip of an eye eros, oh, throat

I don't do well with expectation. Come up here if it's too cool a story below with your windows cracked. Higher is warmer in this last, fast phantasmick interval.

suspended trapeze like in a trance blankness at the red light slipping to sleep from this hell the thousand slights, slings, and piercing things the children endure post-Brown due to fortunes of color, the sneer of lips and snarl of larynx fill my passenger window, on this overcast afternoon—

'Ain't you that integratin' nigger?'

while I lift the Colt 45 from its place, and with a fool's certainty aim it between the pores of his nostrils:

'And ain't you that segregatin' cracker I'm 'bout to drop right here.'
He would be 42 this August.
That’s how old I was when he died in 1989.
Amazing! How many meanings time has. He
Was almost 15 and 27 years later I am almost 70.
Where do 27 years go? But we are still stuck
On that roof where he fell or jumped—from.
(What happened on that roof or in his head?)
How could he be 42? How would he be at 42? A man of sorts.
Not an adolescent that Sunday—a week before the accident—
the four of us sent him off to buy milk so we could smoke dope.
Oh, had we clung to him maybe he would have known a little
more love and it would have tamped down the anger that drove
him up to that treacherous asphalt and tripped/tricked him
Over it.
Every woman has her tragedy. Don’t she?
Alcoholic car crash and death
Crime of passion death (in a surprise bedroom)
Sudden cardiac or fatal stroke during a key lecture
Fall and striking his head on concrete
Giving up of her child to harsh adoption
Loss of your child to a house fire when you are stopped from running back in to
save him
Lynching of your neighbor of 29 years
Loss of a limb
Or a breast or your mother to kidnap and murder (though no habeus corpus)
Yes, we all have our tragedies.
And so, 27 years later our lives are more tragic than they would have been if we could
be toasting to
Your 42nd birthday in August.
l**ipstick corny**

(for M.J.S.)

Lipstick
on wine glass corny
mark of femme-memory.
sage, basil, dill, parsley
gifts to our worthless, reckless, feckless souls.
every one harvested from planted pots.

too many cigarettes
—never free of nicotene’s je ne sais quoi—and reefer—
(but never enough—no matter your dealer never busted or robbed in 43 years)—

Then, spotting the wine glass take it up,
'I'll have wine now.'
'Sure, want red? There's also vouvray.'
'I prefer the red.'
pour from the Malbec, its bright magenta rim.
so much cover.

and a next morning memory
ephemeral
lipstick traces on wine glass
What does it mean

to be five years old and kill your family pet?
Probably you will enjoy murder mysteries as an adult. Possibly you will write them.
Undoubtedly you will have empathy for the murderer remembering the sensation of grabbing that random butcher knife from the kitchen table confining puppy to a corner and stabbing her through the middle with a quick underhand jab and your delight in puppy’s alien scream causing mother to race to the scene fearing the wild cry herself screaming pushing you out of her way as she tries to stanch the wound with dish towels wiping the floor simultaneously and yells at you to get the hell out of her sight, ‘before I stab you.’

48 Years

since the Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.
(Attach those juniors so we always know the boys have daddies.)

Martin Luther King, Jr., ‘Mike,’ in his silk suits and silk pajamas. Did he benefit the Negro? Did he hate women? Or just Ella Baker? Izola Curry?

King’d come into Birmingham or Albany or Selma or Chicago or Memphis in two ways:

Way One, acc. to witness: during the day and with him come the paparazzi and the front-page Pulitzer winners, and then in three days King’d leave—and leave the clean-up to the foot soldiers.

Way Two, acc. to legend: by night with his crowd of preachers and such, after a plate of smothered short ribs, mac and cheese, collards, candied sweets, and, despite endless self-recrimination after the fact, King’d say to his confreres, “Time to go souling.”

Lived a charmed life, King did—long as he lived it.
pray for all the dead you say?
what about get even for all the dead?
for all the dead? I don't want to pray
after all the dead.

too many desecrated and
mass graves
ashes and
incineration over
high places:
praying for all those burning
jumpers
from
sky
scrapers.

how can what I pray save those
cought in a church bombing
or shot there
or sunk in a river

Can there ever be an after?
Can there ever be all the dead?

Must I identify my dead child by his dead father's
ring?
Woman Ends Her Life: Elegy

“To those who have wanted to see my body buried can now have the opportunity.”

Found by one of her neighbors last Monday, hanging by the neck, dead, in her house, and judging from the condition of the body had been dead several days and

rather an eccentric person, known at times to disappear without telling anyone where or when she would return from somewhere there several days, judging from the condition of the body

but as she had not put in an appearance, neighbors investigated and found her as stated, hanging by the neck, leaving the above epitaph, in her house several days, judging from the condition of the body last Monday.

Tercet

The Confederate flag:
Don’t be so quick to bury your stars and bars in some museum of military history.
Reckless Domesticity

I am a reckless locked door.
Can't be kept from jumping out a window. Runaway six months. Justus hid me in his master's carriage house ten miles down the road.

I felt good. When the patrollers caught me and brought me back, Miss Zenny beat me hard but not hard enough to keep me from running away again.

Running until I run far enough away to get free. Free is a worrisome thing to get even when you get there. And get there can I live in it.
Notes


“Emergency Open Heart Surgery”: Thanks to the cardiac surgery team at the University of Chicago Medical Center for saving my life on April 10. And thanks to everyone in Hobart, N.Y. and Jersey City, N.J. who supported Barbara and me in 2017 during my recovery from open heart surgery. Heartfelt thanks to my high school friend, Maury Collins of Chicago, for driving me to the ER, and my brother-in-law, David Balliet, for driving us from Chicago to his and his wife Nancy’s house in Chestertown, Md., where I began my recuperation.

“What Does It Mean” (p. 18): Appeared in 6X6 Magazine

“Woman Ends Her Life: Elegy: Epigraph” source: 1911 obituary in the Delaware County Times. Appeared in 6X6 Magazine