

She came out on the stage in yards of pearls, emerging like
a favorite scenic view, flashed her golden smile and sang. 5

Because grey laths³ began somewhere to show from underneath
torn hurdygurdy⁴ lithographs of dollfaced heaven;
and because there were those who feared alarming fists of snow
on the door and those who feared the riot-squad of statistics, 10

She came out on the stage in ostrich feathers, beaded satin,
and shone that smile on us and sang.

1948

Middle Passage¹

*Jesús, Estrella, Esperanza, Mercy:*²

Sails flashing to the wind like weapons,
sharks following the moans the fever and the dying;
horror the corposant and compass rose.³

Middle Passage: 5
voyage through death
to life upon these shores.

"10 April 1800—
Blacks rebellious. Crew uneasy. Our linguist says
their moaning is a prayer for death,
ours and their own. Some try to starve themselves. 10
Lost three this morning leaped with crazy laughter
to the waiting sharks, sang as they went under."

Desire, Adventure, Tartar, Ann:

Standing to America, bringing home 15
black gold, black ivory, black seed.

*Deep in the festering hold thy father lies,
of his bones New England pews are made,
those are altar lights that were his eyes.⁴*

Jesus Saviour Pilot Me 20
Over Life's Tempestuous Sea⁵

3. Strips of wood or metal used as supports in building.

4. Barrel organ or similar musical instrument played by turning a crank.

1. The journey across the Atlantic from Africa to the Americas aboard slave ships.

2. Names of slave ships. "Estrella": star (Spanish). "Esperanza": hope (Spanish).

3. Circle printed on a map showing compass

directions. "Corposant": a fiery light that can appear on the decks of ships during electrical storms.

4. An allusion to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* 1.2.399-401: "Full fathom five thy father lies / Of his bones are coral made / Those are pearls that were his eyes."

5. Lines from a Protestant hymn.

We pray that Thou wilt grant, O Lord,
safe passage to our vessels bringing
heathen souls unto Thy chastening.

Jesus Saviour 25

"8 bells. I cannot sleep, for I am sick
with fear, but writing eases fear a little
since still my eyes can see these words take shape
upon the page & so I write, as one
would turn to exorcism. 4 days scudding,⁶
but now the sea is calm again. Misfortune 30
follows in our wake like sharks (our grinning
tutelary⁷ gods). Which one of us
has killed an albatross?⁸ A plague among
our blacks—Ophthalmia: blindness—& we 35
have jettisoned the blind to no avail.
It spreads, the terrifying sickness spreads.
Its claws have scratched sight from the Capt.'s eyes
& there is blindness in the fo'c'sle⁹
& we must sail 3 weeks before we come 40
to port."

*What port awaits us, Davy Jones'
or home? I've heard of slavers drifting, drifting,
playthings of wind and storm and chance, their crews
gone blind, the jungle hatred 45
crawling up on deck.*

Thou Who Walked On Galilee

"Deponent¹ further sayeth *The Bella J*
left the Guinea Coast
with cargo of five hundred blacks and odd 50
for the barracoons² of Florida:

"That there was hardly room 'tween-decks for half
the sweltering cattle stowed spoon-fashion there;
that some went mad of thirst and tore their flesh
and sucked the blood: 55

"That Crew and Captain lusted with the comeliest
of the savage girls kept naked in the cabins;
that there was one they called *The Guinea Rose*
and they cast lots and fought to lie with her:

6. Running rapidly before the wind.

7. Guardian.

8. Sea bird thought to bring good luck; to kill one is considered a bad omen. An allusion to Samuel

Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mar-

iner."

9. I.e., forecabin; sailors' quarters aboard a ship.

1. One who gives evidence.

2. Slave quarters.

"That when the Bo's'n piped all hands,³ the flames
spreading from starboard already were beyond
control, the negroes howling and their chains
entangled with the flames: 60

"That the burning blacks could not be reached,
that the Crew abandoned ship, 65
leaving their shrieking negresses behind,
that the Captain perished drunken with the wenches:

"Further Deponent sayeth not."

Pilot Oh Pilot Me

II

Aye, lad, and I have seen those factories,
Gambia, Rio Pongo, Calabar;⁴
have watched the artful mongos⁵ baiting traps
of war wherein the victor and the vanquished

Were caught as prizes for our barracoons.
Have seen the nigger kings whose vanity 75
and greed turned wild black hides of Fellatah,
Mandingo, Ibo, Kru⁶ to gold for us.

And there was one—King Anthracite we named him—
fetish face beneath French parasols
of brass and orange velvet, impudent mouth 80
whose cups were carven skulls of enemies:

He'd honor us with drum and feast and conjo⁷
and palm-oil-glistening wenches deft in love,
and for tin crowns that shone with paste,
red calico and German-silver trinkets 85

Would have the drums talk war and send
his warriors to burn the sleeping villages
and kill the sick and old and lead the young
in coffles⁸ to our factories.

Twenty years a trader, twenty years, 90
for there was wealth aplenty to be harvested
from those black fields, and I'd be trading still
but for the fevers melting down my bones.

3. I.e., when the boatswain (petty officer) signaled to all the crew.
4. A city in southeast Nigeria. Gambia is a West African nation. Rio Pongo is an East African waterway.

5. Africans.
6. African tribes.
7. Dance.
8. Trains of slaves fastened together.

III

Shuttles in the rocking loom of history,
the dark ships move, the dark ships move, 95
their bright ironical names
like jests of kindness on a murderer's mouth;
plough through thrashing glister toward
fata morgana's⁹ lucent melting shore,
weave toward New World littorals¹ that are 100
mirage and myth and actual shore.

Voyage through death,
voyage whose chartings are unlove.

A charnel stench, effluvium of living death
spreads outward from the hold, 105
where the living and the dead, the horribly dying,
lie interlocked, lie foul with blood and excrement.

*Deep in the festering hold thy father lies,
the corpse of mercy rots with him,
rats eat love's rotten gelid eyes. 110*

*But, oh, the living look at you
with human eyes whose suffering accuses you,
whose hatred reaches through the swill of dark
to strike you like a leper's claw.*

*You cannot stare that hatred down
or chain the fear that stalks the watches
and breathes on you its fetid scorching breath;
cannot kill the deep immortal human wish,
the timeless will. 115*

"But for the storm that flung up barriers
of wind and wave, *The Amistad*,² señores,
would have reached the port of Príncipe in two,
three days at most; but for the storm we should
have been prepared for what befell.
Swift as the puma's leap it came. There was 125
that interval of moonless calm filled only
with the water's and the rigging's usual sounds,
then sudden movement, blows and snarling cries
and they had fallen on us with machete
and marlinpike. It was as though the very 130
air, the night itself were striking us.
Exhausted by the rigors of the storm,
we were no match for them. Our men went down
before the murderous Africans.³ Our loyal

9. A mirage.
1. Shores.
2. "Friendship"; a Spanish ship carrying fifty-three illegally obtained slaves out of Havana, Cuba, in July 1839.

3. During the mutiny the Africans, led by a man called Cinqué, or Cinquez, killed the captain, his slave Celestino, and the mate, but spared the two slave owners.

Celestino ran from below with gun
 and lantern and I saw, before the cane-
 knife's wounding flash, Cinquez,
 that surly brute who calls himself a prince,
 directing, urging on the ghastly work.
 He hacked the poor mulatto down, and then
 he turned on me. The decks were slippery
 when daylight finally came. It sickens me
 to think of what I saw, of how these apes
 threw overboard the butchered bodies of
 our men, true Christians all, like so much jetsam.
 Enough, enough. The rest is quickly told:
 Cinquez was forced to spare the two of us
 you see to steer the ship to Africa,
 and we like phantoms doomed to rove the sea
 voyaged east by day and west by night,
 deceiving them, hoping for rescue,
 prisoners on our own vessel, till
 at length we drifted to the shores of this
 your land, America, where we were freed
 from our unspeakable misery. Now we
 demand, good sirs, the extradition of
 Cinquez and his accomplices to La
 Havana.⁴ And it distresses us to know
 there are so many here who seem inclined
 to justify the mutiny of these blacks.
 We find it paradoxical indeed
 that you whose wealth, whose tree of liberty
 are rooted in the labor of your slaves
 should suffer the august John Quincy Adams⁵
 to speak with so much passion of the right
 of chattel slaves to kill their lawful masters
 and with his Roman rhetoric weave a hero's
 garland for Cinquez. I tell you that
 we are determined to return to Cuba
 with our slaves and there see justice done. Cinquez—
 or let us say 'the Prince'—Cinquez shall die."

The deep immortal human wish,
 the timeless will:

Cinquez its deathless primaveral image,
 life that transfigures many lives.

Voyage through death
 to life upon these shores.

1962

4. *The Amistad* reached Long Island Sound after two months, where it was detained by the American ship *Washington*; the slaves were imprisoned, and the owners were freed. The owners began litigation to force the slaves' return to Havana to be

tried for murder.

5. The case reached the Supreme Court in 1841; the Africans were defended by former president John Quincy Adams, and the court released the thirty-seven survivors to Africa.

Those Winter Sundays

Sundays too my father got up early
 and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
 then with cracked hands that ached
 from labor in the weekday weather made
 banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

5

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
 When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
 and slowly I would rise and dress,
 fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
 who had driven out the cold
 and polished my good shoes as well.
 What did I know, what did I know
 of love's austere and lonely offices?

10

1962

O Daedalus, Fly Away Home¹

(For Maia and Julie)

Drifting night in the Georgia pines,
 coonskin drum and jubilee banjo.

Pretty Malinda, dance with me.
 Night is juba, night is conjo.²
 Pretty Malinda, dance with me.

5

Night is an African juju³ man
 weaving a wish and a weariness together
 to make two wings.

O fly away home fly away

Do you remember Africa?

10

O cleave the air fly away home

My gran, he flew back to Africa,
 just spread his arms and
 flew away home.

1. In Greek mythology, Daedalus and his son, Icarus, were imprisoned by the Minotaur in a labyrinth (designed by Daedalus himself). He made wings of wax and feathers so he and Icarus could escape, but when Icarus flew too close to the sun, the wax binding together the wings melted and he

fell into the sea and drowned. Daedalus escaped to Sicily.

2. "Conjo" and "juba" are dances.

3. Endowed with magical powers; a West African belief.