

“Strange Fruit”

Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the roots
Black bodies swingin' in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant south
The bulging eyes and twisted mouth
Scent of magnolias sweet and fresh
And the sudden smell of burning flesh

Here is the fruit
For the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather
For the wind to suck
For the sun to rot
For the tree to drop

Here is a strange and bitter crop (1939)

-“Lewis Allen”/Abel Meeropol (1903-1986)

Heroic Crown of Sonnets - Collman

1. Write fifteen Petrarchan sonnets about a historical figure. This will require research.
2. Create a heroic crown of sonnets - 'a sequence of interlinked sonnets in which the last line of one becomes the first line, sometimes slightly altered, of the next. A heroic crown of sonnets is a sequence of fifteen interlocked sonnets, in which the last one is made up of the first lines of the preceding fourteen.'
3. Have at least five allusions to other works of literature, and have these cited only at the end of all poems.
4. Use personification, similes, metaphors, and other poetic devices in order to achieve highest marks.
5. Cite any sources used in research in an MLA works cited page. **Do not** parenthetically cite within your poetry. Poems should flow unimpeded.
6. Dedicate your book of sonnets.
7. Using an acrostic in the last sonnet is a bonus opportunity.

Test Grade poetic devices: _____
Comments:

Test Grade HCS structure: _____
Comments:

Test Grade grammar, spelling, & works cited: _____
Comments:

Rosemary for remembrance, Shakespeare wrote:

I

a speech for poor Ophelia, who went mad
when her love killed her father. Flowers had
a language then. Rose petals in a note
said, *I love you*; a sheaf of bearded oat
said, *Your music enchants me*. Goldenrod:
Be careful. Weeping-willow twigs: *I'm sad*.
What should my wreath for Emmett Till denote?
First, heliotrope, for *Justice shall be done*.
Daisies and white lilacs, for *Innocence*.
Then mandrake: *Horror* (wearing a white hood,
or bare-faced, laughing). For grief, more than one,
for one is not enough: rue, yew, cypress.
Forget-me-nots. Though if I could, I would

Forget him not. Though if I could, I would
forget much of that racial memory.

II

No: I remember, like a haunted tree
set off from other trees in the wildwood
by one bare bough. If trees could speak, it could
describe, in words beyond words, make us see
the strange fruit that still ghosts its reverie,
misty companion of its solitude.
Dendrochronology could give its age
in centuries, by counting annual rings:
seasons of drought and rain. But one night, blood,
spilled at its roots, blighted its foliage.
Pith outward, it has been slowly dying,
pierced by the screams of a shortened childhood.

Pierced by the screams of a shortened childhood,
my heartwood has been scarred for fifty years
by what I heard, with hundreds of green ears.
That jackal laughter. Two hundred years I stood
listening to small struggles to find food,
to the songs of creature life, which disappears
and comes again, to the music of the spheres.
Two hundred years of deaths I understood.
Then slaughter axed one quiet summer night,
shivering the deep silence of the stars.
A running boy, five men in close pursuit.
One dark, five pale faces in the moonlight.
Noise, silence, back-slaps. One match, five cigars.
Emmett Till's name still catches in the throat.

III

Emmett Till's name still catches in my throat,
 like syllables waylaid in a stutterer's mouth.
 A fourteen-year-old stutterer, in the South
 to visit relatives and to be taught
 the family's ways. His mother had finally bought
 that White Sox cap; she'd made him swear an oath
 to be careful around white folks. She'd told him the truth
 of many a Mississippi anecdote:
 Some white folks have blind souls. In his suitcase
 she'd packed dungarees, T-shirts, underwear,
 and comic books. She'd given him a note
 for the conductor, waved to his chubby face,
 wondered if he'd remember to brush his hair.
 Her only child. A body left to bloat.

IV

Your only child, a body thrown to bloat,
 mother of sorrows, of justice denied.
 Surely you must have thought of suicide,
 seeing his gray flesh, chains around his throat.
 Surely you didn't know you would devote
 the rest of your changed life to dignified
 public remembrance of how Emmett died,
 innocence slaughtered by the hands of hate.
 If sudden loving light proclaimed you blest
 would you bow your head in humility,
 your healed heart overflow with gratitude?
 Would you say yes, like the mother of Christ?
 Or would you say no to your destiny,
 mother of a boy martyr, if you could?

V

Mutilated boy martyr, if I could,
 I'd put you in a parallel universe,
 give you a better fate. There is none worse.
 I'd let you live through a happy boyhood,
 let your gifts bloom into a livelihood
 on a planet that didn't bear Cain's curse.
 I'd put you in a nice, safe universe,
 not like this one. A universe where you'd
 surpass your mother's dreams. But parallel
 realities may have terrorists, too.
 Evil multiplies to infinitude,
 like mirrors facing each other in hell.
 You were a wormhole history passed through,
 transformed by the memory of your victimhood.

VI

Erase the memory of Emmett's victimhood.
 Let's write the obituary of a life
 lived well and wisely, mourned by a loving wife
 or partner, friends, and a vast multitude.
 Remember the high purpose he pursued.
 Remember how he earned a nation's grief.
 Remember accomplishments beyond belief,
 honors enough to make us ooh, slack-jawed,
 as if we looked up at a meteor shower
 or were children watching a fireworks display.
 Let America remember what he taught.
 Or at least let him die in a World Trade tower
 rescuing others, that unforgettable day,
 that memory of monsters, that bleak thought.

VII

The memory of monsters: That bleak thought
 should be confined to a horror-movie world.
 A horror classic, in which a blind girl
 hears, one by one, the windows broken out,
 an ax at the front door. In the onslaught
 of terror, as a hate-filled body hurls
 itself against her door, her senses swirl
 around one prayer: Please, God, forget me not.
 The body-snatchers jiggle the doorknob,
 werewolves and vampires slaver after blood,
 the circus of nightmares is here. She screams,
 he screams, neighbors with names he knows, a mob
 heartless and heedless, answering to no god,
 tears through the patchwork drapery of our dreams.

VIII

Tears, through the patchwork drapery of our dream,
 for the hanging bodies, the men on flaming pyres,
 the crowds standing around like devil choirs,
 the children's eyes lit by the fire's gleams
 filled with the delight of licking ice cream,
 men who hear hog screams as a man expires,
 watch-fob good-luck charms teeth pulled out with pliers,
 sinners I can't believe Christ's death redeems,
 your ash hair, Shulamith-Emmett, your eye,
 machetes, piles of shoes, bulldozed mass graves,
 the broken towers, the air filled with last breaths,
 the blasphemies pronounced to justify
 the profane, obscene theft of human lives.
 Let me gather spring flowers for a wreath.

IX

Let me gather spring flowers for a wreath.
 Not lilacs from the dooryard, but wildflowers
 I'd search for in the greening woods for hours
 of solitude, meditating on death.

Let me wander through pathless woods, beneath
 the choirs of small birds trumpeting their powers
 at the intruder trampling through their bowers,
 disturbing their peace. I cling to the faith
 that innocence lives on, that a blind soul
 can see again. That miracles do exist.

In my house, there is still something called grace,
 which melts ice shards of hate and makes hearts whole.
 I bear armloads of flowers home, to twist
 into a circle: trillium, Queen Anne's lace...

X

Trillium, apple blossoms, Queen Anne's lace,
 woven with oak twigs, for sincerity...
 Thousands of oak trees around this country
 groaned with the weight of men slain for their race,
 their murderers acquitted in almost every case.
 One night five black men died on the same tree,
 with toeless feet, in this Land of the Free.
 This country we love has a Janus face:
 One mouth speaks with forked tongue, the other reads
 the Constitution. My country, 'tis of both
 thy nightmare history and thy grand dream,
 thy centuries of good and evil deeds,
 I sing. Thy fruited plain, thy undergrowth
 of mandrake, which flowers white as moonbeams.

XI

Indian pipe, bloodroot. White as moonbeams,
 their flowers. Picked, one blackens, and one bleeds
 a thick red sap. Indian pipe, a weed
 that thrives on rot, is held in disesteem,
 though it does have its use in nature's scheme,
 unlike the rose. The bloodroot poppy needs
 no explanation here: Its red sap pleads
 the case for its inclusion in the theme
 of a wreath for the memory of Emmett Till.
 Though the white poppy means *forgetfulness*,
 who could forget, when the red sap on a wreath
 recalls the brown boy five white monsters killed?
 Forgetting would call for consciencelessness.
 Like the full moon, which smiled calmly on his death.

XII

Like the full moon, which smiled calmly on his death.
Like the stars, which fluttered their quicksilver wings.
Like the unbroken song creation sings
while humankind tramples the grapes of wrath.
Like wildflowers growing beside the path
a boy was dragged along, blood splattering
their white petals as he, abandoning
all hope, gasped his agonizing last breath.
Like a nation sending its children off to fight
our faceless enemy, immortal fear,
the most feared enemy of the human race.
Like a plague of not knowing wrong from right.
Like the consciencelessness of the atmosphere.
Like a gouged eye, watching boots kick a face.

XIII

5

Like his gouged eye, which watched boots kick his face,
We must bear witness to atrocity.
But we are whole: We can speak what we see.
People may disappear, leaving no trace,
unless we stand before the populace,
orators denouncing the slavery
to fear. For the lynchers feared the lynchee,
what he might do, being of another race,
a great unknown. They feared because they saw
their own inner shadows, their vicious dreams,
the farthest horizons of their own thought,
their jungles immune to the rule of law.
We can speak now, or bear unforgettable shame.
Rosemary for remembrance, Shakespeare wrote.

XIV

*R*osemary for remembrance, Shakespeare wrote.
*I*f I could forget, believe me, I would.
*P*ierced by the screams of a shortened childhood,
*E*mmett Till's name still catches in my throat.
*M*amie's one child, a body thrown to bloat,
*M*utilated boy martyr. If I could
*E*rase the memory of Emmett's victimhood,
*T*he memory of monsters... That bleak thought
*T*ears through the patchwork drapery of dreams.
*L*et me gather spring flowers for a wreath:
*T*rillium, apple blossoms, Queen Anne's lace,
*I*ndian pipe, bloodroot, white as moonbeams,
*L*ike the full moon, which smiled calmly on his death,
*L*ike his gouged eye, which watched boots kick his face.

XV