

1994

Poems

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Recommended Citation

Kay, Jackie, Poems, *Kunapipi*, 16(1), 1994.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol16/iss1/94>

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Poems

Abstract

SO YOU THTNK I'M A MULE?, THE MOTHER POEM 2, THE TWEED HAT DREAM, THE MEETING DREAM

up a hero or two to assuage the complexities of racist guilt. Black writers have to be alert to the current search to find, for example, a British version of Alice Walker. We must keep our own vigilant standards. That's why I think constructive criticism is so crucial. I know I have an awful lot to learn from other people and I appreciate it when people take time to tell me what they think of my work, what criticism they have of it, but of course I cannot take the 'let me rip you apart' kind of criticism.

Strangely enough, I find criticism hard to take for another reason. It sometimes embarrasses me because people are treating my work seriously enough to criticize it. There is something very positive about that.

Everything I write is influenced by all of my contradictions and all of my experience. It cannot be otherwise now. I am a woman. I write as a woman. I am black. I write from a black point of view, even if I'm creating a white character, I'm still creating her from a black point of view. I am a lesbian. I write from a lesbian's perspective. I believe somewhere that I have something to say and I will say it.

SO YOU THINK I'M A MULE?

'Where do you come from?'

'I'm from Glasgow.'

'Glasgow?'

'Uh huh. Glasgow.'

The white face hesitates

the eyebrows raise

the mouth opens

then snaps shut

incredulous

yet too polite to say outright

liar

she tries another manoeuvre

'And your parents?'

'Glasgow and Fife.'

'Oh?'

'Yes. Oh.'

Snookered she wonders where she should go
from here -

'Ah, but you're not pure?'

'Pure? Pure what

Pure white? Ugh. What a plight

Pure, Sure I'm pure

I'm rare...'

'Well, that's not exactly what I mean,

I mean ... you're a mulatto, just look at...'

'Listen. My original father was Nigerian

to help with your confusion

But hold on right there

If you Dare mutter mulatto

hover around hybrid

hobble on half-caste
and intellectualize on the
"Mixed race problem",
I have to tell you:
take your beady eyes offa my skin;
don't concern yourself with
the "dialectics of mixtures";
don't pull that strange blood crap
on me Great White Mother.
Say I'm no mating of a she-ass and a stallion
no half of this and half of that
to put it plainly purely
I am black
My blood flows evenly, powerfully
and when they shout "Nigger"
and you shout "Shame"
ain't nobody debating my blackness.
You see that fine African nose of mine,
my lips, my hair. You see lady
I'm not mixed up about it.
So take your questions, your interest,
your patronage. Run along.
Just leave me.
I'm going to my Black sisters
to women who nourish each other
on belonging
There's a lot of us
Black women struggling to define
just who we are
where we belong
and if we know no home
we know one thing;
we are Black
we're at home with that.'
'Well, that's very well, but ...'
'No But. Good bye.'

Jackie Kay

THE MOTHER POEM 2

I always wanted to give birth
 to that incredible natural thing
 that women do – I nearly broke down
 when I heard we couldn't
 and then my man said to me
 well there's always adoption (we didn't have
 test tubes and the rest then) and well
 even in the early sixties there was something
 scandalous about adopting
 telling the world your secret failure
 bringing up an alien child
 who knew what it would turn out to be?

but I wanted a baby badly
 didn't need to come from my womb
 or his seed for me to love it did it
 and I had sisters who looked like me
 didn't need carbon copy features
 blueprints for generations
 it was a baby a baby a baby I wanted

so I watched my child grow
 always the first to hear her in the night
 all this umbilical knot business is
 nonsense – the men can afford deeper sleeps
 that's all. I listened to hear her talk
 and when she did I heard my voice under hers
 and now some of her mannerisms
 crack me up

all them stories could have really had me
 believing unless you are breast
 fed you'll never be close and the rest
 my daughter's warmth spills over me

leaves a gap
when she's gone
I think of her mother

She remembers how I read her
all those magazine and newspaper
cuttings about adoption
she says her head's an encyclopedia
of sob stories – the ones that were never
told and committed suicide on their wedding nights

I always believed in the telling anyhow
you can't keep something like that secret
I wanted her to think of her other mother
out there thinking that child I had will be
eight today nine today all the way up to
god knows when I told my daughter
I bet your mother's never missed your birthday
how could she?

now when people say ah but
it's not like having your own child is it
I say of course it is what else is it
she's my child I've brought her up
told her stories wept at her losses
laughed at her pleasures. She is mine.

yes well maybe that's why I don't
like all this talk about her being Black
I brought her up as my own
as I would any other child
colour matters to the nutters
but she says my daughter says
it matters to her

I suppose there would have been things
I couldn't understand with any child
we knew she was coloured
they told us they had no babies at first
and I chanced to say it didn't matter
what colour it was and then they said
oh well are you sure in that case
we have a baby for you
to think she wasn't even thought of as a baby!
my baby my baby

THE TWEED HAT DREAM

Her mother just turns up at the door.
 With a tweed hat on. I think
 she doesn't suit tweed, she's too young.
 In all these months I've never put a face to her
 that looks like my daughter – so picture me
 when I see those lips!

In fact she looks a dead spit
 except she's white lightning white.
 She says in a soft well-spoken voice
 Can you let me see her? I know I shouldn't
 but can you? What could I do?
 She comes in swift as wind in a storm
 rushes up the stairs as if she knows the house
 already, picks up my baby
 and strokes her cheeks endlessly
 till I get tired and say I'll be downstairs.
 I put the kettle on, maybe
 hot tea will redden those white cheeks,
 arrange a plate of biscuits which keep
 sliding onto the floor.

She's been up there helluva long
 I don't know where the thought comes from
 but suddenly I'm pounding the stairs like thunder.
 Her tweed hat is in the cot. That is all.

THE MEETING DREAM

If I picture it like this it hurts less

We are both shy
 though our eyes are not
 they pierce below skin
 we are not as we imagined
 I am smaller, fatter, darker
 she is taller, thinner
 (and I'd always imagined her hair dark brown
 not grey) I can see my chin in hers
 that is all, though no doubt
 my mum will say when she looks at the photo

she's your double she really is

There is no sentiment in this living room
 a plain wood table and a few books
 we don't cuddle or even shake hands
 though we smile sudden as a fire blazing
 then die down
 her hands play with her wedding ring
 I've started smoking again

We don't ask big questions even later by the shore
 we walk slow, tentative as crabs
 No so *what have you been doing the past 26 years?*
 Just *what are you working at?* Stuff like that

Ages later I pick up a speckled stone
 and hurl it into the sea
is this how you imagined it to be?
 I never imagined it.
 Oh. I hear the muffled splash.
 It would have driven me mad imagining
 26 years is a long time

Inside once more I sip hot tea
 notice one wood framed photo
 the air is as old as the sea
 I stare at her chin till she makes me look down
 her hands are awkward as rocks
 my eyes are stones washed over and over

If I picture it like this it hurts less

One dream cuts another open like a gutted fish
 nothing is what it was
 she is too many imaginings to be flesh and blood.
 There is nothing left to say;
 neither of us mentions meeting again