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## Poems

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## Poems

### **Abstract**

EXILE, NEGATION, AU TOMBEAU DE BISHOP For Sandra Barry, ECCLESIASTES 12

# George Elliott Clarke

## EXILE

Your lost country floats – oily – in ether;  
 It floats while burning to ash. Your mind chars  
 Black because you pitch – moth-like – in the flames.  
 You salve your scorching brain with slave-trade rum –  
 The only gold you can own, corroding  
 Your liver. You turn everything to dreams.

When you think about it (when you can think) –  
 After all the lies that make nostalgia,  
 All the dead faces that occupy photographs,  
 All the sadistic, executed loves,  
 Your eyes itch and ache with water, then dry –  
 Curling like dead leaves – ready for sour fire.

## NEGATION

My black face must look like murder to you.  
 I crabbed out crooked, near plots where apples  
 Rotted and woodlots slumped in peonage  
 And brothers were dangled from a gallows  
 To fatten rabid crows and newspapers.  
 No local Caliban slaved to root spells  
 From weeds, only jugs of rust-salted beer.

*Le nègre negated, meagre, c'est moi:*  
 A whiskey-coloured provincial, uncouth  
 Mouth full of lies, moth-eaten lyrics, musty,  
 Mutilated scripture. Her Majesty's  
 Nasty, Nofaskoshan Negro, I mean  
 To go out shining instead of tarnished,  
 To take apart *Poetry* like a heart.

## AU TOMBEAU DE BISHOP

For Sandra Barry

Cruel scrutiny is your furious power:  
It orders light – orcharded, hoarded fast  
In your dark poems: miniature Bibles  
Monstrous with agonies of pneumonia  
And cranky Bedlams, storing sick mothers  
Like just-hooked fish, their eyes jumpy with shock.

To dredge your poems is to grapple nightmares –  
Offal of Presbyterian-depressed  
*Nouvelle-Écosse* (its poverty of love,  
Its raw, tubercular winters) – and snag  
Images smelling of hookrust and flesh  
Randy with death.

Photographic, spiky,  
Your anthems dramatize the malicious,  
Narrow cold that cankers our compassion  
And blisters our dreams, freezing us into  
This penal colony peninsula.

Peeling back our pitched ensembles of blossoms,  
You expose our snow-riled landscape, our warped  
Shacks, our nicest incests, our plums slumped in dirt.  
Your metaphors pierce us like frigid spears  
Or hot, Botticellian syphilis.  
Accurate as aches, you chill and scald us.

Dread Elizabeth Bishop, seize our lives,  
Anatomize them – like a liar's diary.  
Your lyrics still inflict wounds choice eyes brave –  
The lines slash sharp, bright, incendiary.

## ECCLESIASTES 12

I remember God during these sweet years –  
While the penniless, pensioned days are far,  
And the stars birth sunflowers in a black garden,  
And the moon shellacks the river with teal light,  
And the young bride sleeps and the greyed husband  
Stands in the doorway and stares at the night,  
And entrepreneurs turn, blind, from windows,  
And banks are flung open to assassins,  
And lawyers moan, giving birth to money,  
And vipers quarrel in the mouths of priests,  
And poems wither away, leaving musick,  
And the plump, elegant girls pluck apples,  
And the pimp jollys his quarry with wine,  
And desire charges each luscious limb,  
And dragonflies darkle, gleaming through soot,  
And the daughters of musick rise and go,  
And the river shambles home, leaking stars,  
And my fears melt like the dawn's silver fog,  
And my poems are repeated by many.