

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Angele Ellis: Three Poems

Angele Ellis · Thursday, September 23rd, 2021

Rocking the Apollo at The Stanley Theatre, 1979

For Scott Silsbe

It wasn't James Brown, cape running with sweet sweat and swimming
with stars like the Monongahela River. But Brown's *Please, please, please*
reached this burg's brothers and sisters like echoes from the Great Migration,
like thunder from the god's lyre: make music, change your lives.

It wasn't Harlem's neo-classical temple, that landmark music hall,
the Apollo whose columns rise like fresh gardenias behind Billie Holiday's
ear, like Mahalia Jackson's hymns to the divine, like Ella Fitzgerald's golden
basket, like Louis Armstrong's legendary trumpet sounding at heaven's gate.

It was Pittsburgh's Stanley Theatre, in 1979. The Stanley, once a movie palace
whose 20-foot chandelier shivered crystal tears when Bill "Bojangles"
Robinson tapped onscreen with little Shirley Temple—but chimed
when he danced there live—and jived with Cab Calloway and Duke Ellington.

Eras shifted; rock stars supernovaed. On that stage in 1980, another god,
Bob Marley, would burn with love in his last public performance,
beads rising from his dreadlocks like the flares of a thousand Zippo lighters,
wailing—against the cancer of our world—his redemption song.

But this was 1979. Pittsburgh's own Phyllis Hyman was opening
(like a flower, a red iris in a slit satin gown) for the smooth Peabo Bryson.
I didn't know who they were when the music editor at the magazine
where I was an intern handed me the tickets. Didn't know that my

poor-little-college-girl uniform of sweater, jeans, and Mia clogs
(just like my roommate's) in which we'd trekked the Himalayan slopes
of The Syria Mosque for Bonnie Raitt, wasn't right for this evening—not
against the gleaming dresses that swirled and dipped and swooped like jazz,

the slick hair spangled with blossoms, the stilettos scaling like skyscrapers,

the sharkskin suits and shiny ties, the bronze and ebony brilliantine,
o god, if you want to *know* the beauty of black, sink like two lumps of dough
into a concert hall where the only other white face is the Elton John-ish dude

tickling the ivories for Phyllis Hyman. *Don't shoot the piano player. He is doing
the best that he can.* His grin caught the groove like our own dim reflection, while
Phyllis was beautiful, a torch song glowing in the first act of her trilogy. An eon
away from the day she canceled her engagement at Harlem's Apollo with one note:

I'm tired. I'm tired. Those of you that I love know who you are. May God bless you.
(Yes, the god is creation *and* destruction, his eyes pitiless and blank at sundown.)
But in 1979, Phyllis stood radiant before the coiled crowd waiting for Peabo.
When Bryson appeared, a groom in his cream tuxedo, the ladies' man, the crooner,

better than wedding cake trimmed with silver roses, the hall erupted like Vesuvius.
The wan bouffant teenagers who swooned like falling dominoes for Beatlemania
had *nothing* on the ladies of all sizes and ages giving it up for Peabo, sacrificing
like vestal virgins, screaming like Maenads—bridal and funereal, lustful and divine.

Later, Peabo crossed over to Disney to duet "Beauty and the Beast" with Celine,
became the promise tinkling like music boxes in white girls' princess bedrooms,
but that evening he belonged to his people, the black and proud, and no, he wasn't
James Brown, but something was liberated in me that night, rising like a small star

formed by that explosion, triumphant despite the set faces of pale bristling cops
whose *cordon sanitaire* could not contain the celebration, the joy spilling down
the steps of The Stanley Theatre, and yes, it was enough to make me into a poet,
that night in Pittsburgh, in the year of Apollo and the Good Lord Jesus, 1979.

From Under the Kaufmann's Clock (Six Gallery Press). First published in Uppagus.

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Strike Sparks

Two weeks ago I felt an egg, small as a pearl of roe,
roll down the old scarred string, pain striking like a lit
cigarette along my left side. They are tough, this cluster
of possibilities I was born with, like the lovely bunch
of coconuts ripening in the fronds this morning, as I hid
in my Costa Rican lookout. Not raw umber, burnt sienna—
crayon colors spilling to the sky blue sea beyond.

Below a steam of coffee, whiff of iron between my legs,
ache of unused blood beading, redder than the inside
of your mouth. Aching everywhere in my bruised body
desire has sparked—breasts, tongue, womb—beating

there like a second heart. Recalling your scorched
voice in my ear before I went...*thrusting harder*
and harder inside you, until we can't stand it anymore...

Do you wonder why I tease you against wet lips,
wanting you unsheathed, stripping lust to this primary
gate? My love, my unexpected mate, our poems are
generations our hot matched bodies never will make.
Awake now, we trade stories like Scheherazade,
a thousand and one nights of calligraphic twining,
flares of maroon narrative along forest green veins.

From Spared (A Main Street Rag Editor's Choice Chapbook).

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Vanilla

You dreamed I was sharing ice cream with another man
and when I gave you the carton, only a few lumps
rattled on the bottom. Tonight, in the steam-heated summer
of your apartment, I open a new cylinder of vanilla, smooth
as fresh-laundered sheets, flecked with the dark spice of your dream.
I trace your initials in the softening surface, pain your mouth
with chill sweetness, as your full underlip disappears
like a rose under snow. Spooning will come later. Now
I use my fingers, scoop the essence of childhood onto your tongue.
You suck and sigh. I catch my breath and kiss you, melting
the buttons of your shirt. I decorate the buds of your nipples,
finishing my licks with an unexpected bite. Make and unmake
a cold ribbon down your chest. Ornament your uprightness
like an Isaly's Skyscraper cone, mountaineering in firm flesh.
Vanilla pools against the cardboard, just enough left
for you to spread like frosting on my thighs, cool the hot wetness
between my lips. This is a recurring dream, the electric shock
of your entrance, ice and fire, plunging into the cream.

From Under the Kaufmann's Clock (Six Gallery Press). First published in Oysters & Chocolate.

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