

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Matthew E. Henry: Two Poems

Matthew E. Henry · Friday, May 5th, 2023

when asked to read a poem for the Black History Month assembly

the vice principal kept his hand on the fire alarm.
the principal dialed 9 and 1, her trembling finger
poised over the final digit. the superintendent
scoured district bylaws to find a fireable offense.
at least one guidance counselor had pooped her pants.

before I picked up the microphone, most sneaker squeaks
and side conversations ceased. all the auditorium-ed ears
waited for whatever out of pocket thing they thought I'd say,
rehearsed the list of "incidents" they were sure I'd mention.
the whispered events some labeled "racist," other called
"accidents" or "unfortunate" they were convinced
I'd put on blast. some shifted uncomfortably thinking
of things overheard—in classrooms, the caf, a car—, or
remembered things they thought, said, done themselves.

before I started reading, some internally argued about
the existence of "white privilege" and "white fragility,"
mentally hosted an Oppression Olympics—a broad jump
comparing slavery and the Jim Crow era to the horrors
their own ancestors faced, regardless their nation of origin.
asked themselves when "our month, our assembly" would be,
clenched fists folded under crossed arms.

before I opened my mouth, some asked why I had to be
so divisive, why school had to be so "woke"—somehow
making the word sound like it started with an "n," ended
with a hard "er"—while others smiled, rubbed hands,
there for all the smoke.

after I finished reading, the tension in the room remained
unabsorbed by the white and wood panels covering the walls,
which I thought was strange since I read a poem
about why squirrels are infinitely superior to dogs.

*

thank you, systemic racism

for making shoplifting easier—
as you coon hunt me around the store,
the white boys I paid, pick-pocket
a Christmas wish list for my kids.

for believing centuries of cotton fields,
fire hoses, and batons have hardened our bodies—
crucible cured our skin—to hold more pain, denying
me opioids after my car crash, saving the heroin
and fentanyl statistics for your own.

for the welcomed elbow room
on buses, planes, and trains, whether
or not I turn up the Adjei-Brenyah
of my Blackness.

for your Sambo-ing sight at recess,
in gym class, and all musical ensembles
where I was picked early, gifted with more
than 10,000 hours to live up to your assumptions.

for the paradoxical irony
of low expectations—your dim light
making college professors and employer
impressed by my slightest effort, blinded
by the black star of my brilliance.

*



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