

Poems by Dr Velma McClymont in response to the Black Lives Matter movement

1) Haikus 96-100: "The Grapes of Wrath"

"Am I not a man?"
Paying the price of freedom
Under the world's glare.

"Each Dawn I Die" in
The land of milk and honey
Where "Justice is blind."

"Mama, I can't breathe."
Another black neck under
America's knee.

"Am I not a bro(ther)?"
Eight minutes without air to
Draw the breath of life.

"Ain't I a Woman?"
"I came, I saw"; I lived once:
"Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory..."

2) "Black Lives Matter"

How is it that governments are supposed to
Be protecting citizens in lockdown and yet
Police violence/brutality against Black folk
Seems to be enjoying a rapid resurgence?

That a man could brazenly fly a banner over
A football pitch saying "White Lives Matter"
Should be enough to tell the extent to which
Black people's everyday reality is dismissed!

How is it that three friends (two Black & one
White) can be stopped by three Boys in Blue
But the Black youths are secured in handcuffs
While the white lad is a privileged bystander?

That a group of people should stand guard in
Front of a statue believing that an angry mob
Is on the March and is hell bent on destroying
It without questioning the past speak volumes!

How is it people shielding are only just waking
Up to the systemic inequalities all around them?
Where have all these sympathisers been over
Years when we were wailing, "I can't breathe"?

3) "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"

You, the beneficiaries of privilege, you see
Yourselves as being attacked by antiracists
Whom you regard as racist against you for
Declaring boldly that "Black Lives Matter".

You, the kneeneckists, see yourselves as the
Avengers in a society where trees are meant
For lynching: six African Americans dangling
Since George Floyd's slaughter - "suicides?"

You, the Costume Queen, accuse us of being
Racist against whites for boycotting 'Oscars'
In which we are not worthy of being nominated
For our art and are included for 'a bit of colour'.

You, culture vultures, you lionise Shakespeare
While accusing us of penning mediocre writing,
Denying the right to remake kitchen sink drama
In flashback: "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?"

You, the creators of cultural artefacts such as
How the West Was Won, Apache & Geronimo,
You transport your culture abroad and muzzle
Us: "Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to..."

You, who if you apply for a boardroom chair
Are likely to clinch it, you accuse us of crying
Wolf when our shattering of glass ceilings are
But daydreams: "Nice work - if you can get it."

You, the power brokers, you blank our reality
In our dystopic, dangerous and violent zones
While you commission neat white fences and
Manicured green lawns in your "Wisteria Lane".

You, the beneficiaries of white privilege, refuse
To accept that your work stations are virtually
Devoid of colour and your weekend 'boltholes'
Exist in a utopia that divides and separates us!

You ("Lucky! Lucky! Lucky Jim!") deny that you
Live in a world where you can do anything for
You're the lawmakers, historians, film creators,
Song writers: "All things bright and beautiful..."

4) 'Pentimento!'

You follow me around the store but has it ever

Occurred that the white woman in the skincare
Section has just placed a sample of red lipstick
In her grab-bag instead of the shopping trolley?

You say I look “suspicious” walking along the
Road in a black hoodie and designer trainers
But has it occurred to you that I am a Black
Father dashing out to buy a pack of nappies?

You say that I’m aggressive with super human
Strength when I am slapped in handcuffs while
My white friend is afforded the curtsey of not
Being searched with no violations of his rights?

You say you are exempt from racism yet you
Banter about ‘not our club’ and ‘not our sort’
While invalidating my experience as a black
Woman for racism has no effect on your life?

You say I have no work ethics and no skills to
Offer an employer who has tried to recruit a
More diverse workforce but is reluctant to do
So because it will only end in tears: “disaster!”

You deny your undetectable “veil of privilege”
For such accusations upset the privileged who
Fear that they’ll be seen as having advantages
While we (blackness) are stripped of our rights?

Has it ever occurred to you that we have never
Experienced equality, respect and dignity in any
Situation where the law, healthcare, education
Employment and police violence are concerned.

5) This Sceptred Isle!

So the world has woken up to police racism
And the material advantages of being white.
So our nation thinks racism is only endemic
Across the pond - not in this sceptered isle!

Yes, my friends, racism happens over here!
What of those deaths in custody in the UK,
Those unreported cases “dying for justice”,
Not to mention all those restraint concerns?

As for unexplained deaths in police custody,
No one charged with criminal conduct though
Resistance is meted with strong-armed tactics:
“Swing low, sweet chariot coming for to carry...”

So you are working to break down barriers,
To taking action against racism in the USA!
Great Britain has her problems: "Black people
Are more than twice as likely to die in custody."

So your placards say that you are non-racist,
Going from Bristol to Oxford to London town,
Marching to tear down the might of Britain's
Imperial power house: Churchill and Rhodes!

You say you are keen to share untold histories,
Committed to engaging the public in a debate
About the people who built the British Empire
Under slavery: "You only know what you learn."

6) "Fly, Fly, Little Silver"

You may publicly say that "All men are equal",
Using your false tongue to twist the real truth.
You may judge me by your moral standards
But still you can't bring me down to your level.

You may stamp your feet on my dreams and
Trample my hopes like a herd of beef cattle.
Did you think that I would roll over and cower
In the stampede which you secretly started?

You may try to say that "We are all just people",
Denying Britannia's part in the black holocaust.
Does my 'mouthiness' make you see red flags?
Does it irritate you when I call for reparations?

You may silence my voice and reject my books
Because they refuse to recognise Empire Day!
You may reduce my history to one Black month
But still I'll write myself a life in world literature.

Does my rise to heights of great men irk you?
Did you ever dream that I would outsmart you,
Using the master's tools to carve my own path?
Did you want to strip me bare of my self-worth?

You may say that we have no right to remain
Or that aliens and migrants don't belong here.
You may destroy my hopes and kill my ambitions
But still I'll rise out of the ashes like the Phoenix.

Did you want to see me prostrate before you,
Flat on my face and weeping like a willow tree?
Does my refusal to bow in humility goad you?

Up, up, up from the depths of slavery I'll rise!

I am the blood, sweat and tears of yesterday's
Rebel women who toiled in Britain's sugarcane
Fields until their hands were gnarled - twisted:
Psst! "Fly, fly, little silver bird fly. Fly, fly away..."

(This poem was inspired by Maya Angelou; and credit to The Paragons - Ska/Rocksteady group).

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