

Bio: Black Baptist/Bastard

For Dionne Brand

History fell upon us like the lash.
(I am not rash.) Black Baptists wept out prayers—
Passion—to hector tar into nectar,
To harvest undeniable honey,
But our scorched eyes were stooped by white faces,
We sank, stupefied by white capital,
Eating grained self-hatred in our churches,
Gulping *Welch's* grape juice, bile, and venom,
While chalked Jesus carped at us like a cop,
His sneered face crapping, "God damn your black ass."
Slavery was dead, wasn't it? But blood
Crusted on our rusty-tasting sermons,
A taint of blood for saint-plush lips. We could
Not look at the Atlantic and not cry,
"*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*" We knew
The terror of evacuated faith.
The stars had fallen cold where they were stalled—
For no one had believed—*loved*—for aeons.

The air swerves cold with such calamity.
I chronicle a cold, pockmarked epoch,
Map a county where trains gnaw their way home,
Blackened mummies pitch, gutted by gypsum,
Frail Baptists fall, their crotches worm-eaten,
Debris escalates when black ice sleets in.
I come from Windsor Plains, wine-stained poet,
Choosing not to imbibe William Williams'
Rain in the galvanized pail by the well.
Well, as a child, I spread blackstrap on bread
Between bitter dollops of the Bible.
I had to. I was guilty. I had spied
My sun-skinned mother's glaring skin. (I eyed,
Self-condemned, her shimmering, mixed-race breasts.)
Enough snow has fallen without license.
A *Putsch* arrests my heart. My life's naked.
Listen closely. I am trying to cry.
That's my condemned blood on the page.

GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE