

Classic Poetry Series

Evie Shockley
- poems -

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Evie Shockley()

Born and raised in Nashville, Tennessee, Evie Shockley received her BA from Northwestern University. After studying Law at the University of Michigan, she earned her PhD in African Literature from Duke University.

Shockley's first book, *The Gorgon Goddess*, was published by Carolina Wren Press in 2001. Since then she has published three books: *a half-red sea* (Carolina Wren Press, 2006), *31 words * prose poems* (Belladonna* Books, 2007), and *the new black* (Wesleyan University Press, 2011).

Embracing both free verse and formal structures, Shockley straddles the divide between traditional and experimental poetics. A review of her work in *Library Journal* noted that, "Shockley's work incorporates elements of myth without being patently 'mythical' and is personal without being self-indulgent, sentimental without being saccharine." Her reported influences include Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton, and Harryette Mullen.

A Cave Canem graduate fellow, Shockley was also awarded a residency at the Hedgebrook Retreat for Women Writers in 2003. Two of her poems were displayed in the Biko 30/30 exhibit, a commemoration of the life and work of anti-apartheid activist Steven Biko, which toured South Africa in 2007.

Shockley was co-editor of the poetry journal *jubilat* from 2004-2007, and teaches African American Literature and Creative Writing at Rutgers University-New Brunswick.

— Shall Become As —

You put this pen
in my hand and you
take the pen from
 my hand. the night
before the full moon

 the moon seems
full. what is missing
is a dark hungry
 sickle, the sliver
of shadow eating

 us up inside. after
the mountains breathe
their mint-and-sorrow
 green against the long
summer sky, they burst

 into hot october
laughter, lighting
the horizon with citrus,
 rust, and blood. you
put this knife in my

 hand. we pull. we
meet as oceans come
together, heaving
 against and clinging
across our salt watery

 boundary. we approach
endlessly like two rails
of one track, tied
 in a parallel that
promises our eyes to

 merge, someplace far
off in the distance. you
put this feather in my

palm. my fingers
close around flight.

Evie Shockley

A Background In Music

music city u.s.a. it was, nothing doing without a song,
and not just twangy tunes that rhyme southern drawls
with guitar strings, though it's true i knew charlie pride
before charlie parker, but music, music, music, broadway
numbers (one! . . .) broadcast over speakers in the park,
pointer sisters fingering ohio players on the school bus,
the elementary chorus performing a patriotic medley
for the bicentennial, the high school madrigals wringing
the carol of the bells out of our overworked throats each
december, WVOL simulblasting car wash or little red corvette
out the windows of every deep ride rolling in the black
neighborhoods, melodies to carry over the clap*slap*snap
of our hands clocking time (miss mar-y mack mack mack)
or to keep us out of trouble with the jump rope, pep squad
cheers to perfect, spontaneous spirituals in the church
parking lot, and, yes, some country, the mandrells, the oak
ridge boys, tuning in to hee-haw's banjo humor and gloom,
the music was howdy and whassup, hell naw! and aw yeah!,
merry, happy, baby-baby, and god loves you if no one else does:
to ourselves, to applause, in talent shows, in choirs, on cue
and (mostly) in key, we sang everything there was to say.

Evie Shockley

A Sonnet For Stanley Tookie Williams

All month this country has careened toward cold
and winter's celebrations: what a star
announced—a birth—and then a chance to fold
a year away, pull one fresh from the drawer,

if not clean, well, unworn. in just a few
months arrives the ice-hot day of the dead-
come-back-to-life—time then to ask how new
and re- beginnings differ. mary bled

for the december miracle, as some-
one must. did you imagine sacrifice
as you called the crips to life? did they come,
those youngbloods, at the crackling of your voice,

like lazarus to christ? vigilant night.
on the road to san quentin, candlelight.

Evie Shockley

Ballplayer

i cop a squat on a squared-off log,
to watch you ball on the community center court.
butt numb, i shift my weight

and shake mosquitos from my ankles,
but never take my eyes off the game.
yours follow the orange orb, your pupils
twin, brown moons reflecting its light.

your play is wild efficiency,
you are a four-pronged magic wand,
waving, as if agentless, in all directions at once.
an opponent dribbles the ball - now he sees it,

now he don't, it's gone, flown,
and you've given it its wings.
you are one-eighth of the shrieking rubber,

one-eighth of the growls and calls. you are
the delicious assist, the unerring pass.
you spread your skills out before me, a peacock
among pigeons, as if to say "all eyes on me,"

and make it worth my while.
a chill trails the sun west like a long, clammy train,
crawls over me and my makeshift bench,
over the emptying playground,

but stops at the edge of the concrete,
where eight men burning keep it at bay,
the way torches smoking around a patio

ward off insects. twilight rises like dark steam
from the dewy grass, but you don't see it.
the ball still lights the court
until the winning jumper sinks and puts it out.

then earth returns to view, and you jog over
to slap my palm and beam,

and receive the grin i give you like a trophy.

Evie Shockley

canvas and mirror

self-portrait with cats, with purple, with stacks
of half-read books adorning my desk, with coffee,

with mug, with yesterday's mug. self-portrait
with guilt, with fear, with thick-banded silver ring,

painted toes, and no make-up on my face. self-
portrait with twins, with giggles, with sister at

last, with epistrophe, with crepuscule with nellie,
with my favorite things. self-portrait with hard

head, with soft light, with raised eyebrow. self-
portrait voo-doo, self-portrait hijinks, self-portrait

surprise. self-portrait with patience, with political
protest, with poetry, with papers to grade. self-

portrait as thaumaturgic lass, self-portrait as luna
larva, self-portrait as your mama. self-portrait

with self at sixteen. self-portrait with shit-kickers,
with hip-huggers, with crimson silk, with wild

mushroom risotto and a glass of malbec. self-
portrait with partial disclosure, self-portrait with

half-truths, self-portrait with demi-monde. self-
portrait with a night at the beach, with a view

overlooking the lake, with cancelled flight. self-
portrait with a real future, with a slight chance of

sours, with glasses, with cream, with fries, with
a way with words, with a propositional phrase.

Evie Shockley

Disciple

My father: younger, handsome, downright square,
eyes like brown buttons fastening his face
over his soul, mouth not too straight to swear,
to say, man, sonny stitt's ass trashed the place,

hymning his saxophonist small-g god,
enlisted arms push-up strong, lips curled less
and less around cigarettes (in an odd
reversal of what the army did best:

march men to foul habits) and more around
his mouthpiece, in search of pure embouchure:
not square: hell-bent on welling a full sound
from his horn: a liquid literature

with biblical phrasing, an interlude
of stimulants unchemical to blood.

Evie Shockley

du bois in ghana

at 93, you determined to pick up and go—
and stay gone. the job nkrumah called you to,
to create, at last, your encyclopedia africana
 (encompassing a continent chipped

like wood beneath an axe, a large enough
diaspora to girdle the globe, and a mere four
thousand years) was either well-deserved
 sinecure or well-earned trust

that your health was as indestructible as
your will. my mind wrestles with possible pictures:
the victorian sensibility, the charcoal wool
 formality of your coats and vests, the trim

of your beard as sharp as the crease of your
collar—how would these du boisian essentials
hold up to sub-saharan heat? would
 your critical faculties wilt in accra's

urban tropics as i've read that westerners'
are wont to do? dr. du bois, i presume
you took the climate in stride, took to it,
 looked out your library's louvered windows

onto a land you needed
neither to condemn nor conquer,
and let the sun tell you what you already knew:
 this was not a port to pass on.

your 95th birthday photo found you bathed
in white cloth, cane still in hand, sharing a smile
with a head of state who knew your worth—joy
 that this nation's birth occurred in time

for you to step out of a cold, cold storm
into outstretched arms. would your pan-
african dream have survived a dictatorial
 nkrumah, an nkrumah in exile? you took

the prerogative of age and died without telling,
without knowing. a half-century later, here
in the country where you were born, i look
 into a screen and watch as, near and far, a pan-

demic of violence and abuse staggers the planet.
we seed the world with blood, grow
bleeding, harvest death and the promise
 of more. when i turn bitter, seeing no potential

for escape, i think of the outrages you saw—wars,
lynchings, genocide, mccarthy, communism's
failure to rise above corrupting power
 any better than capitalism had, the civil rights

movement's endless struggle—and how
you kept writing and walking, looking
for what you knew was out there. your memory,
 your tireless radiant energy, calls me

to my work, to my feet, insisting
that somewhere on the earth, freedom is
learning to walk, trying not to fall,
 and, somewhere, laboring to be born.

Evie Shockley

Effect Shrewd Preferences

the screed seen here blesses
 the sweet, the meek, the gentle,
 the serene. let eyes ensembled
peep the news sheets: ere
 december descends, we'll elect
 the next pres, reps, etc. when
we welter, cede the wheel,
 we let greed-questers enter
 (well-dressed jerks!). they send
themselves the green we need,
 help themselves fleece the sheep
 we be. we're the perfect prey!
the press sleeps the sleep we
 deserve, then bleeds berserk
 text between celeb tweets. we'd
best reject the mess, steer
 the fleet between these repellent
 hells. veer! swerve! reverse!
here's the pledge: we'll expect
 better press. elect the decent
 men, the keenest shes. revere
sense. never feed spleen lest
 we weep endless weeks, red-
 eyed, bereft. let excellent pens
represent the experts' ken, help
 peeps remember key elements.
 let's select well. we'll revel yet.

Evie Shockley

From The Lost Letters Of Frederick Douglass

Dear Daughter,

Can you be fifty-three this month? I still look for you to peek around my door as if you'd discovered a toy you thought gone for good, ready at my smile to run up and press your fist into my broken palm. But your own girls have outgrown such games, and I cannot pilfer back time I spent pursuing Freedom. Fair to you, to your brothers, your mother? Hardly.

But

what other choice did I have? What sham, what shabby love could I offer you, so long as Thomas Auld held the law over my head? And when the personal threat was ended, whose eyes could mine enter without shame, if turning toward my wife and children meant turning my back?

Your mother's eyes stare out at me through yours, of late. You think I didn't love her, that my quick remarriage makes a Gertrude of me, a corseted Hamlet of you. You're as wrong as you are lucky. Had Anna Murray had your education as a girl, my love for her would have been as passionate as it was grateful. But she died illiterate, when I had risked my life to master language. The pleasures of book and pen retain the thrill of danger even now, and you may understand why Otilie Assing, come into our house to translate me into German, could command so many hours, years, of my time—or, as you would likely say, of your mother's time.

Forgive me,

Rosetta, for broaching such indelicate subjects, but as my eldest child and only living daughter, I want you to feel certain that Helen became the new Mrs. Douglass because of what we shared in sheaves of my papers: let no one persuade you I coveted her skin. I am not proud of how I husbanded your mother all those years, but marriage, too, is a peculiar institution. I could not have stayed so unequally yoked so long, without a kind of Freedom in it. Anna accepted this, and I don't have to tell you that her lot was better and she, happier, than if she'd squatted with some other man in a mutual ignorance.

Perhaps I will post, rather than burn, this letter, this time. I've written it so often, right down to these closing lines, in which I beg you to be kinder, much kinder, to your step-mother. You two are of an age to be sisters, and of like temperament—under other circumstances, you might have found Friendship in each other.

With regards to your husband—I am, as ever, your loving father—

Evie Shockley

Her Tin Skin

i want her tin skin. i want
her militant barbie breast,
resistant, cupped, no, cocked
in the V of her elbow. i want
my curves mountainous

and locked. i want her
arabesque eyes, i want her
tar markings, her curlicues,
i want her tin skin. she
is a tree, her hair a forest

of strength. i want to be
adorned with bottles. i
want my brownness
to cover all but the silver
edges of my tin skin. my

sculptor should have made
me like her round-bellied
maker hewed her: with chain-
saw in hand, roughly. cut
away from me everything

but the semblance of tender.
let nothing but my flexed
foot, toeing childhood, tell
the night-eyed, who know
how to look, what lies within.

Evie Shockley

Lifeline

wedged in the top branches, rain still sighing
to earth as a dissolute sky dissolves,
a mozambican woman turns mother,
her water breaking loose to pool with the flood

licking the trunk below, a country-sized
puddle calls forth the child whose name, the mother
vowed, would not be drowned, no matter how
high she had to climb. my mother's water

washed her bare yellow bathroom tile many
years ago, a diluvial warning
of my struggle to arrive. we fought to
get me out, and have been tugging at each

other ever since, tethered by a cord
that simply thickens when it's cut. we
descended then, thirsting, churning, not into
the waters that hound the mozambican

mother, baying her and her baby in
the tree, but into that enduring ocean
in which—as mother, daughter, or both—a
woman's only choices are drink or swim.

Evie Shockley

Notes To My Nieces (Or, Essays In Fortune-Telling)

when i was younger, trees
were green, money was green, money
grew on trees, or trees grew up
and became money. now, money is clearly
plastic, spreads like cancer, getting it
is genetic.

trust me on this. g o d stands
for good old days, and if you have enough
faith, you can remember them almost
like you were there, on your knees
with us, scrubbing them clean or
praying for the millennium, that next life,
when the g o d would be n e w : not
especially white.

question: your
mother is black and your father is loving.
answer: what's loving got to do
with virginia?

i fear
that your cows ain't like mine, that you
won't understand why i gave up
red meat.

say the past is a muddy
river. say the future is a belated alphabet
with which you and i might spell
different things. say the present
is something we can pass back and forth
between us, like an acorn, like
loose change.

Evie Shockley

On New Year's Eve

we make midnight a maquette of the year:
frostlight glinting off snow to solemnize
the vows we offer to ourselves in near
silence: the competition shimmerwise

of champagne and chandeliers to attract
laughter and cheers: the glow from the fireplace
reflecting the burning intra-red pact
between beloveds: we cosset the space

of a fey hour, anxious gods molding our
hoped-for adams with this temporal clay:
each of us edacious for shining or
rash enough to think sacrifice will stay

this fugacious time: while stillness suspends
vitality in balance, as passions
struggle with passions for sway, the mind wends
towards what's to come: a callithump of fashions,

ersatz smiles, crowded days: a bloodless cut
that severs soul from bone: a long aching
quiet in which we will hear nothing but
the clean crack of our promises breaking.

Evie Shockley

Pantoum: Landing, 1976

Dreaming the lives of the ancestors,
you awake, justly terrified of this world:
you could dance underwater and not get wet,
you hear, but the pressure is drowning you:

you're awake, but just terrified of this world,
where all solids are ice: underwater boogie,
you hear, but the press sure is drowning you:
the igbo were walking, not dancing:

where all solids are ice, underwater boogie
is good advice, because they're quick to melt:
the igbo were straight up walking, not dancing:
and you've still got to get through this life:

take my advice, quickly: they're melting:
you could dance underwater and not get wet:
and you've got to, to get through this life still
dreaming the lives of the ancestors

Evie Shockley

Playing With Fire

something is always burning, passion,
pride, envy, desire, the internal organs
going chokingly up in smoke, as some-
thing outside the body exerts a pull
that drags us like a match across sand-
paper. something is always burning,
london, paris, detroit, l.a., the neighbor-

hoods no one outside seems to see until
they're backlit by flames, when the out-
siders, peering through dense, acrid,
black-&-orange-rimmed fumes, mis-
take their dark reflections for savages
altogether alien. how hot are the london
riots for west end pearls? how hot in tot-

tenham? if one bead of cream rolls down
one precious neck, heads will roll in brix-
ton: the science of sociology. the mark
duggan principle of cause and effect:
under conditions of sufficient pressure—
measured roughly in years + lead ÷ £s—
black blood is highly combustible.

Evie Shockley

Statistical Haiku (Or, How Do They Discount Us? Let Me Count The Ways)

only 3 of 100 black boys
entering kindergarten will graduate college—
in the night sky, shooting stars

every day a black person
under 20 years old commits suicide—
plucked magnolia blossom's funereal perfume

a black man is 700% more likely
than a white man to be sentenced to prison—
scattered thundershowers in may

every 3 minutes
a black child is born into poverty—
pine needles line the forest floor

Evie Shockley

The Anklet

my sister's visit
to india begins
it. i asked for a sari,
but received
what would fit
in her pack.
silver. link
after link, bone
interlocked with
O. a blossom
of bells at the clasp.
months elapsed
before i dared
to wear it. finally,
the snaky spine
shining against
my skin. a tinkling
paces me when i
walk, brings
would-be lovers
to my feet.
the encircling gift
is a freedom:
the one leg chained
only to itself.

Evie Shockley

Waiting On The Mayflower

i. august 1619

arrived in a boat, named
and unnamed, twenty, pirated

away from a portuguese
slaver, traded for victuals.

drowned in this land of fresh,
volatile clearings and folk

with skin like melted
cowrie shells. soon shedding

servitude. soon reaping
talents sown on african soil.

after indenture, christians,
colonists. not english, but

not yet not-white. antoney
and isabella, whose marriage

stretched the short shadows
of america's early afternoon

into the dusky reaches of evening,
whose conjugal coitus spent

first the choice coin of africa
on rough virginian citizenship,

baptized their son, william,
into the church of england.

ii. december 1638

fear must have shuddered

into boston on the backs

of true believers—men and
women of an unadorned god—

deep in the heavy black fabric
of their coats and dresses like

a stench. black a mark of
pride they wore as if branded,

never dreaming they could
take it off. envy anticipated

their advent. glittered at them,
settling in, from the knife

blades of the massachusetts.
seeped like low-pitched

humming from the fur
lining the natives' warm

blankets. but desire docked
in 1638. in from the harbor

flocked a people whose eyes
sparked like stars, even near

death. whose hair promised
a mixture of cotton and river

water and vines, a texture
the fingers ached for. who

wholly inhabited a skin the
midnight color of grace

that clarified the hue of the
pilgrims' woolen weeds. fear

and envy claimed pride of place,

put desire's cargo to good use.

iii. march 1770

that night, crispus attacks
dreamed. how he'd attacked

his would-be master and fled
in wild-eyed search of self-

determination. discarded
virginia on the run and ran

out of breath in salt-scented
boston. found there, if not

freedom, fearlessness. a belief
in himself that rocked things

with the uncontrolled power
of the muscular atlantic, power

to cradle, to capsize. awoke
angry again at the planter

who'd taken him for a mule
or a machine. had shouldered

a chip the size of concord
by the time the redcoat dared

to dare him. died wishing he'd
amassed such revolutionary

ire in virginia. died dreaming
great britain was the enemy.

iv. july 4th: last
but not least

17-, 18-, 19-76 and still
this celebration's shamed

with gunpowder and words
that lie like martyrs in cold

blood. africa's descendents,
planting here year after year

the seeds of labor, sweating
bullets in this nation's warts,

have harvested the rope,
the rape, the ghetto, the cell,

the fire, the flood, and the
blame for you-name-it. so

today black folks barbeque
ribs and smother the echoes

of billie's strange song in
sauces. drink gin. gladly

holiday to heckle speeches
on tv. pretend to parade.

turn out in droves for distant
detonations, chaos, controlled

as always, but directed
away from us tonight. stare

into the mirror of the sky
at our growing reflection,

boggled by how america
gawks at the passing pinpoints

of flame, but overlooks the vast,
ebony palm giving them shape.

Where Is It Clean

when your mother can rise from her place
on the pew during the early service,

early enough that the sun barely fills the sky
with its weak straw, but row after row

in the auditorium is flush with folks who want
to be home before the football game gets underway

or hate the slower pace the later service takes
but still got to get their god on

before starting a new week: when she can rise
and tip down the aisle, three-inch heels

pointing a warning at hell through the plush
mauve carpet, smile and nod at preacher,

who is sitting on the pulpit's little throne
with his bible beneath his palm, a man thick-chested

and stout-bellied with moral authority, whose face
gleams with crushing benevolent power:

when she can give him a pleasant nod,
and circle around behind the microphone standing

like a thin silver trophy between the heavenly
floral arrangements, give a firm tug

to the hem of her suit jacket, and lean over
the dimpled nob, the ribbons encircling the crown

of her broad-brimmed hat quivering with each
breath, the crisp white paper in her hands

held out at arm's length from her customary squint,
her eyes scooting back and forth,

between this document and the village of worshipers
fanning themselves and waiting on her voice:

when she can stand there and coo, good morning,
praise the lord and introduce her reading

as a poem by my daughter, a quick look
at your beaming father, then take your words

between her lightly pinked lips and raise each one
to the light, before god and these witnesses,

enunciating like she learned to recite from the fourth-
grade primer in her schoolhouse's single room,

sending sound through the vowels
like a bell: when she can do this, can rise and walk,

and smile and read and have the church say amen -
then you can safely declare: it is clean.

Evie Shockley

Where You Are Planted

He's as high as a georgia pine, my father'd say, half laughing. southern trees
as measure, metaphor. highways lined with kudzu-covered southern trees.

fuchsia, lavender, white, light pink, purple : crape myrtle bouquets burst
open on sturdy branches of skin-smooth bark : my favorite southern trees.

one hundred degrees in the shade : we settle into still pools of humidity, moss-
dark, beneath live oaks. southern heat makes us grateful for southern trees.

the maples in our front yard flew in spring on helicopter wings. in fall, we
splashed in colored leaves, but never sought sap from these southern trees.

frankly, my dear, that's a magnolia, i tell her, fingering the deep green, nearly
plastic leaves, amazed how little a northern girl knows about southern trees.

i've never forgotten the charred bitter fruit of holiday's poplars, nor will i :
it's part of what makes me evie : i grew up in the shadow of southern trees.

Evie Shockley