

Fugue

1. Walking (1963)

after the painting by Charles Alston

You tell me, knees are important, you kiss
your elders' knees in utmost reverence.

The knees in the painting are what send the people forward.

Once progress felt real and inevitable,
as sure as the taste of licorice or lemons.
The painting was made after marching
in Birmingham, walking

into a light both brilliant and unseen.

2. 1964

In a beige silk sari
my mother danced the frug
to the Peter Duchin Band.

Earlier that day
at Maison Le Pelch
the French ladies twisted

her magnificent hair
into a fat chignon
while mademoiselle watched,

drank sugared, milky tea,
and counted bobby pins
disappearing in the thick-

ness as the ladies worked
in silence, adornment
so grave, the solemn toilette,

and later, the bath,
and later, red lipstick,
and later, L'Air de Temps.

My mother without glasses.
My mother in beige silk.
My mother with a chignon.
My mother in her youth.

3. 1968

The city burns. We have to stay at home,
TV always interrupted with fire or helicopters.
Men who have tweedled my cheeks once or twice
join the serial dead.

Yesterday I went downtown with Mom.
What a pretty little girl, said the tourists, who were white.
My shoes were patent leather, all shiny, and black.
My father is away saving the world for Negroes,
I wanted to say

Mostly I go to school or watch television
with my mother and brother, my father often gone.
He makes the world a better place for Negroes.
The year is nineteen-sixty-eight.

4. 1971

“Hey Blood,” my father said then
to other brothers in the street.
“Hey, Youngblood, how you doin’?”

“Peace and power,” he says,
and “Keep on keepin’ on,”
just like Gladys Knight and the Pips.

My stomach jumps: a thrill.
Sometimes poems remember small things, like
“Hey, Blood.” My father
still says that sometimes.

5. The Sun King (1974)

James Hampton, the Sun King
of Washington, DC
erects a tinfoil throne.
“Where there is no vision, the people perish.”
Altar, pulpit, lightbulbs.

My 14th and “U,” my 34 bus, my weekday winos,
my white-robed black Israelites
on their redstone stoops,
my graffiti: “Anna the Leo as ‘Ice,’”
my neon James Brown poster
coming to the DC Coliseum
where all I will see is the circus,
my one visit to RKO Keith’s Theater
to see *Car Wash*
and a bird flew in, and mania,
frantic black shadow on the screen,
I was out of the house in a theater full of black folks,
black people, black movie, black bird,
I was out, I was free, I was at RKO Keith’s Theater
at 14th and “U”
and it was not *Car Wash* it was the first
Richard Pryor concert movie
and a bird flew in the screen
and memory is romance
and race is romance,
and the Sun King lives
in Washington, DC.