History at Noon: Black and Blue
July 10, 2020

For this final session, we will be examining a different kind of historical source: poetry. Poetry has often been a site of social commentary, and the poetry produced during the Freedom Struggle was no exception. In 1966, poet Amiri Baraka, founder of the Black Arts Movement, insisted that “we want poems that kill.” June Jordan (1936-2002) was a disciple of the Black Arts Movement. She was a Harlem-born Jamaican-American poet, playwright, essayist, and activist. She wrote “Poem about Police Violence” in 1978 after the death of Arthur Miller, a black community leader and business owner in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, at the hands of the police. Miller went outside to see why police were arresting his brother. Eighteen policemen restrained Miller, resulting in a chokehold that led to his death.


Tell me something
what you think would happen if
everytime they kill a black boy
then we kill a cop
everytime they kill a black man
then we kill a cop

you think the accident rate would lower subsequently?
sometimes the feeling like amaze me baby
comes back to my mouth and I am quiet
like Olympian pools from the running
mountainous snows under the sun

sometimes thinking about the 12th House of the Cosmos
or the way your ear ensnares the tip
of my tongue or signs that I have never seen
like DANGER WOMEN WORKING

I lose consciousness of ugly bestial rapid
and repetitive affront as when they tell me
18 cops in order to subdue one man
18 strangled him to death in the ensuing scuffle
(don't you idolize the diction of the powerful: subdue
and scuffle my oh my) and that the murder
that the killing of Arthur Miller on a Brooklyn
street was just a "justifiable accident" again
(Again)

People been having accidents all over the globe
so long like that I reckon that the only
suitable insurance is a gun
I'm saying war is not to understand or rerun
war is to be fought and won
sometimes the feeling like amaze me baby
You think the accident rate would lower subsequently


Dear Sirs:

I have been enjoying the law and order of our community throughout the past three months since my wife and I, our two cats, and miscellaneous photographs of the six grandchildren belonging to our previous neighbors (with whom we were very close) arrived in Saratoga Springs which is clearly prospering under your custody.

Indeed, until yesterday afternoon and despite my vigilant casting about, I have been unable to discover a single instance of reasons for public-spirited concern, much less complaint.

You may easily appreciate, then, how it is that I write to your office, at this date, with utmost regret for the lamentable circumstances that force my hand.

Speaking directly to the issue of the moment:

I have encountered a regular profusion of certain unidentified roses, growing to no discernible purpose, and according to no perceptible control, approximately one quarter mile west of the Northway, on the southern side.

To be specific, there are practically thousands of the aforementioned abiding in perpetual near riot of wild behavior, indiscriminate coloring, and only the Good Lord Himself can say what diverse soliciting of promiscuous cross-fertilization.
As I say, these roses, no matter what the apparent background, training, tropistic tendencies, age, or color, do not demonstrate the least inclination toward categorization, specified allegiance, resolute preference, consideration of the needs of others, or any other minimal traits of decency.

May I point out that I did not assiduously seek out this colony, as it were, and that these certain unidentified roses remain open to viewing even by children, with or without suitable supervision.

(My wife asks me to append a note as regards the seasonal but nevertheless seriously licentious phenomenon of honeysuckle under the moon that one may apprehend at the corner of Nelson and Main)

However, I have recommended that she undertake direct correspondence with you, as regards this: yet another civic disturbance in our midst.

I am confident that you will devise and pursue appropriate legal response to the roses in question. If I may aid your efforts in this respect, please do not hesitate to call me into consultation.

Respectfully yours,