

THE TRAVELING QUEEN



SELECTED POEMS BY
MICHAEL COLLINS

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Notes on Blasphemy

“The governor dissolved us as usual.”

—Thomas Jefferson

“Society is a sea.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

1. *The Last Auctioned American Recollects*

In the first generation the usual things: the future
grandfather stripped quickly for the block,
his youth red wine in the auctioneer's throat, his color
enriched by oils . . . Bought eyes are blinded by sight,
bought nerves sting the flesh like whips.
The slave trembles in arm and thigh
as his price rises from mouth to slaver's mouth, like stock
in cotton when the weevil dies. His soul, a die,
bounces on the spit-streaked ground between the feet
of bidders.

The patient queue, the flower
of freedom, examines him from eyeteeth to foot sole.
Behind the bidding, in a pale harbor clad scantily
in dissolving foam, a smuggler's slave ship—Cuba-
bound Cinderella—gets outfitted. It's rigging is like a lung
that rattles and creaks in the sun as the bidding comes to climax
and a few sailors pause on the forecastle
to see a buyer pocket a life. The bought heart
smokes like a coal; its beats pile up
in a chest ringing like a till; his thoughts multiply like interest
in the new master's accounts. His smith's skill
is harvested. His will clutches the dirt, a plant without its cotton.

2. *A Slave Baptized by Slaves*

Off the boat, off the block, the bought man works a week
in flowering tobacco. But on the seventh night
he was seized by God. Mud behind the cabins
just seemed to yank him to his knees.

Every child could see his heart had opened
like a Bible on Sunday. Adults felt again
the auction block, harder than the devil's skull,
again they heard the voice of the auctioneer slithering
in the ear. A few recalled the touch of heaven
on a heartbeat, felt again baptismal water running
like the sweat of Jesus
down the body: Those took him out
to the Mississippi, and all the rest followed,
and there in the water he saw
the Lord: light like the rainbow hoop
the full moon stamps on clouds. No human face at all.
He said the three-part God wandered
in that light aimlessly, forever.

He tore himself from the minister's grip, twisting and clawing,
he told the wet congregation, "You won't dip *me*
in vanity. Jesus wept—
'cause Jesus lied."

He swore all his time on earth—and he lived another 90 years—
he would break up baptisms, scandalize deacons,
and cuss "that damned ring of light
in which I don't believe."

3. *Reply to Jesus*

My Lord, leave me alone,
My Lord, go home . . .

My life's hard as the rocks
that prisoners strain to break,
hard as the rocks, lord,
that break up ships at sea.

The Funeral

Before they close the casket
the preacher tries to open
heaven with his voice,
and whisper the strongman in.

*The guillotine,
beating like a sharp
eyelid,
bites
through the necks of France . . .*

So a traveler, scouting
revolution like a producer
scouting talent, confided
to his diary in 1793:

*M. Guillotin,
they say, is an enemy
of pain, an altruist. And, indeed, like something miraculous,
his namesake seems to speak; it painlessly utters
the head of Louis, who fathered
revolution by begging
France with wars—and reaching
across the ocean to free America,
and swallowing a fatal dose of ideas
he could not understand.
It utters the head, too, of Robespierre,
great tailor of liberty,
who thought to cut mankind
to the measurements of the future,
that thin girl . . .
Perhaps M. Guillotin
is a ventriloquist!
For the blade grates as it begins
to fall, and falls
with a hiss, as if
to say—"the risk!—the risk!"—*

Praise for MICHAEL COLLINS

“Michael Collins’s poetry rises out of the core of being and seeing—with a touch of Revelations—always searching for the ethereal alongside the earthy low, arriving at the stillpoint of Self. It takes the reader to places of witness where meaning matters; Collins’s language of muscular grace made of experience and deep dreaming crosses landscapes to help reimagine our worlds.”

—Yusef Komunyakaa

“Mike Collins can and does praise and curse God simultaneously, which makes verbal and intellectual fire, a close relative of wisdom. Collins’s poetry, even love poems, are informed by history. His is a major voice. Listen, and change for the better.”

—Stanley Moss

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Born in Jamaica, Michael Collins holds a PhD from Columbia University and teaches English at Texas A&M. He is the author of *Understanding Etheridge Knight* (University of South Carolina Press, 2012) and has authored literary criticism, creative nonfiction, journalism and fiction in various publications such as *PMLA*, *Callaloo*, and Singapore’s *The Straits Times*.



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