

cursing, teaching submission to a bullshit god.  
 Parents and uncles would join the act, too;  
 the whore aunt would argue the virtues  
 of virginity, fat and high on beer, sucking reefer.  
 Their nights would end in spilled wine  
 and the lonely odor of cigarette butts—  
 their curses would greet the sun;  
 but most of our spring nights would end  
 in mellow morning songs and soft rain . . .

1970

### **Malcolm X—An Autobiography**

I am the Seventh Son of the son  
 who was also the seventh.  
 I have drunk deep of the waters of my ancestors,  
 have traveled the soul's journey toward cosmic harmony—  
 the Seventh Son.

Have walked slick avenues  
 and seen grown men, fall, to die in a blue doom  
 of death and ancestral agony;  
 have seen old men glide, shadowless, feet barely  
 touching the pavements.

I sprang out of the Midwestern plains  
 the bleak Michigan landscape, the black blues of Kansas  
 City, these kiss-me-nights;  
 out of the bleak Michigan landscape wearing the slave name  
 Malcolm Little.

Saw a brief vision in Lansing when I was seven, and in  
 my momma's womb heard the beast cry death;

a landscape on which white robed figures ride, and my  
 Garvey father silhouetted against the night-fire  
 gun in hand,  
 form outlined against a panorama of violence.

Out of the Midwestern bleakness, I sprang, pushed eastward,  
 past shack on country nigger shack, across the wilderness  
 of North America.

I hustler. I pimp. I unfulfilled black man  
 bursting with destiny.

New York City Slim called me Big Red,  
 and there was no escape, close nights of the smell of death.  
 Pimp. Hustler. The day fills these rooms.

I'm talking about New York, Harlem.

Talking about the neon madness.

Talking about ghetto eyes and nights

Talking about death protruding across the room

Talking about Small's Paradise.

Talking about cigarette butts, and rooms smelly with white  
 sex-flesh, and dank sheets, and being on the run.

Talking about cocaine illusions.

Talking about stealing and selling.

Talking about these New York cops who smell  
 of blood and money.

I am Big Red, tiger, vicious, Big Red, bad nigger, will kill.

But there is rhythm here

Its own special substance:

I hear Billie sing, no Good Man, and dig Prez, wearing  
 the Zoot suit of life, the Porkpie hat tilted at the  
 correct angle; through the Harlem smoke of beer and  
 whiskey, I understand the mystery of the Signifying  
 Monkey;

in a blue haze of inspiration

I reach for the totality of being.

I am at the center of a swirl of events.

War and death.

Rhythm.

Hot women.

I think life a commodity bargained

for across the bar in Small's.  
I perceive the echoes of Bird  
and there is a gnawing the maw  
of my emotions.

And then there is jail.  
America is the world's greatest jailer,  
and we are all in jails  
Holy spirits contained like magnificent  
birds of wonder.  
I now understand my father urged on by the ghost of Garvey,  
and see a small brown man standing in a corner.  
The cell. Cold. Dank.  
The light around him vibrates.  
(Am I crazy?)  
But to understand is to submit to a more perfect will,  
a more perfect order.  
To understand is to surrender the imperfect self  
for a more perfect self.

Allah formed man, I follow  
and shake within the very depth of my most interesting being;  
and I bear witness to the Message of Allah  
and I bear witness; all praise is due Allah.

Spring 1967

### *The Summer after Malcolm*

The Summer after Malcolm, I lost myself in a jet stream of mad  
words, acts, goading bits of love memory. Like that. It was a  
cold bitch. I mean the pain. Dig, all summer long, I could see  
Malcolm's face drifting with the sound of Harlem children. Old  
men played checkers on the blocks running between Seventh

and Eighth. And yes, there was a moan in the sweating night.  
The wine smells and hallways were screaming women. Angry  
the way the breeze came off from the river. Angered, too, by  
the rustle of soft murmuring silhouettes in the dark park. Child  
of demon lover, I grappled with ancestral ghosts. It was Smokey  
Robinson's summer, the hip falsetto, the long lean lover.

Missed you baby. Missed her smell and awkwardness, the  
brown walk, soft spots in the dark of her. Night turns on its  
edges. Dig, it was a still clinging that robbed sleep those  
summer nights.

*Remember baby. Under the beat, music spiraling over us,  
under the beat, and O how we clung and took that lovely,  
lovely, very mellow, super special ride?*

But that Summer after Malcolm marks my phase in time. After  
Malcolm, the seasons turned stale. There was a dullness in the  
air for awhile. And you had gone, and there was a lingering  
beauty in the pain. Now there are scraps of you here and there  
in the backwash of my mind. And check this: lurking between  
odd pages in a book of blues, your handwriting in red ink . . .

1966/1973

### *Love Song in Middle Passage*

We plunge through time  
and feel  
the westward pull of death—  
slave ships flank the shore,  
across the veldt, songs,  
moaning spirits and lonely rhythms;  
voices plunge, screaming blood.