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Robert Hayden: 03-03-1975

Robert Hayden

Al Poulin Jr.

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HAYDEN: "The poem I'm going to read is "A Ballad of Remembrance" from selected poems. I wrote this poem a long time ago. It has a New Orleans background, but it's not really about Mardi Gras. The figures that appear in it, the symbols that appear in it come from Mardi Gras, but they represent psychological and social or sociological elements, factors. And here is, here is the poem, "A Ballad of Remembrance".

Quadroom mermaids, afro angels, black saints
balanced upon the switchblades of that air
and sang. Tight streets unfolding to the eye
like fans of corrosion and elegiac lace
crackled with their singing. Shadow of time, shadow of
blood.

Shadow echoed the Zulu king, dangling
from a cluster of balloons. Blood
whined the gun-metal priestess, floating
over the courtyard where dead men diced.

What would you have, she inquired, the sallow vendeuse
of prepared tarnishes and jokes of nacre and ormolu,
What but those gleamings, oldrose graces,
manners like scented gloves? Contrived ghosts
rapped to metronome clack of lavalieres.

Contrived illuminations riding a threat
of river, masked negroes wearing chameleon
satins gaudy now as a fortuneteller's
dream of disaster, lighted the crazy flopping
dance of love and hate among joys, rejections.

Accommodate, muttered the Zulu king,
toad on a throne of glaucous poison jewels.
Love, chimed the saints and the angels and the mermaids.
Hate, shrieked the gun-metal priestess
from her spiked bell collar curved like a fleur-de-lis:

As well have a talon as a finger, a muzzle as a mouth,
As well have a hollow as a heart. And she pinwheeled
away in a coruscations of laughter, scattering
those others before her like foil stars.

But the dance continued – now among metaphorical
doors, coffee cups floating poised
hysterias, decors of illusion; now among
mazurka dolls offering death's heads
of cocaine roses and real violets.

Then you arrived, meditative, ironic,
richly human; and your presence was shore where I rested,
released from the hoodoo of that dance where I spoke
with my true voice again.

And therefore this is not only a ballad of remembrance
for the down-South arcane city with death
in its jaws like gold teeth and archaic cuss words;
not only a token for the troubled generous friends
held in the fists of that schizoid city like flowers,
but also, Mark Van Doren,
a poem of remembrance, a gift, a souvenir for you."

[Music]

VOICE: "Brockport Writers Forum, in a continuing series of discussion with leading literary figures, presents the poetry of Robert Hayden, author of a half dozen books of poetry, spanning more than three decades and recipient of a number of literary awards and honors. Robert Hayden, who was considered one of the major black poets of our time, is currently Professor of English at the University of Michigan. Discussing Mr. Hayden's works is A. Poulin Junior, author of the book of poems, "In Advent", editor of the anthology, "Contemporary American Poetry", translator to the "Duino Elegies" and current director of the Writers Forum."

POULIN: "Robert Hayden, welcome to the Writers Forum."

HAYDEN: "Thank you very much. Glad to be here."

POULIN: "I'd like to begin with an obvious question. And that is, under what circumstances did you start writing poetry?"

HAYDEN: "Well, that's a little difficult to answer. I started when I was, really when I was a child. I had heard -- what I read early in my life, before I ever went to school and, of course, when I was down in the grades, people read to me. And when I began to write and was able to read for myself, I don't know, I started trying to write verses. And, by the time I was an adolescent -- or when I was an adolescent, I spent a great deal of time trying to write and so on. And I've been at it a long time."

POULIN: "You say that you read early, and people read to you, do you recall what you were reading?"

HAYDEN: "Yes. This is going to, this is going to sound almost too good, but *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was one of the things [laughter]. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and then there was a children's story called "Beautiful Joe", the story of a cur. And then there was *Robinson Crusoe* and later on, there was Paul Laurence Dunbar. And, when I was a little older and began trying to write poetry, I tried to write dialect verse the way Dunbar did. And, of course, I hadn't heard the kind of dialect that Dunbar has in the, in which Dunbar wrote the poems. But those were some of the things that I remember. And, much later on in my adolescence, of course, I read George Eliot's *Romola* and I read Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* and I read all the Afro-American poets, of course. You know, one doesn't know what to say today, Negro, Afro-American, Black, I'm not really used to Black. I prefer, I think, Afro-American, but anyhow, I had read, in my adolescence, I

began to read the Afro-American poets. Besides Dunbar, Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen and so on. And, of course, when I was a little older, I was trying to write very much like those poets.”

POULIN: “What was it about those poets that interested you the most?”

HAYDEN: “Well, what interested me the most really, I think, I think I've told this story in a little book called, *How I Write*. Hughes and Cullen were especially dear to me because they wrote about themes and subjects that -- or they wrote about things, let us say, that I was very much aware of that were swirling all around me in the old slum section of Detroit. I grew up in the old, poor, slum section of Detroit, Michigan. And they, and especially Langston Hughes, wrote about those matters. And I was attracted to them because I wanted to learn how to use that material. I was, I was intrigued by it and, so, and then there was another thing too. There was a certain amount of pride I took in knowing that those writers were Afro-Americans and I was one and, perhaps, if I worked hard enough, I could, you know, I could be like them. I could achieve something too. So all that went into it.”

POULIN: “Do you know of any of your own poems that you've feel have been specifically influenced by Dunbar or the others?”

HAYDEN: “No, not now. When I was, when I was younger, in my teens and my early twenties, some of the poems I wrote were very much like Countee Cullen's. I remember I wrote a poem it was very much like Countee Cullen's "Heritage", and mine was about Africa too. And, you know, it's really, it's really a laugh today because I'm about as far -- I was then about as far away from Africa as you could get, you know, psychological and every other way. But it was a convention that Afro-American poets all seem, all seem to use, and I think I learned something from the experience. And then, later on, as I say, Langston Hughes's poems using the old blues forms and his poems about ghetto life and so on were things that taught me how to, well, were poems that I learned something from. But now, I don't think there's anything like that in my work. There is a strong element of folklore, or there is a folk motif in many of my poems because I grew up in a folk milieu. And I was used to, I was used to hearing people talk a certain way and make references to things which are clearly, you know, from folk sources. And that's very much in my work.”

POULIN: “This kind of experience that you're talking about, I sensed in a poem called "Those Winter Sundays" which was a very gentle poem, arising out of your experience. I wonder if you'd mind reading that one.”

HAYDEN: “No, not at all. That's a favorite poem of mine. It was written for my foster father who made it possible for me to go to college and all the rest of it. And who was a hardworking man, a Baptist. I grew up a Baptist. And he, he cared a great deal for me. And when the other boys would have to go out in the summers, winters too, for that matter, and work, well he would help me to stay in school. And I owe him a great deal because, had he been like some of the other fathers in the neighborhood, I might -- oh I might have gotten an education eventually, but he really cared, he really cared about me. And he cared about my getting an education. He used to say to me, you know, ‘Get something in your head and then you won't have to live like this.’ And, well, anyway, here's the poem which I wrote for him called, "Those Winter Sundays".

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,

then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

And what hurts me is that, you know, he never lived to know that I cared that much. He did, he didn't know anything about poetry. I mean the people that I lived, that I grew up with, didn't. And, in a way, that was a blessing because they let me alone. Nobody had any, any prejudice against poetry, you know. And when I won a small Hopwood at the University of Michigan back in the thirties, my foster father was still alive. And he was delighted, he didn't know anything -- he didn't know what the poems meant. But he thought it was great that the boy had begun to get some recognition and win prizes. So, at least he, you know, at least he saw that. But it was -- I think it was in the fifties that I wrote this poem. And I can't really tell you what started me to writing it, I just had a nostalgic feeling for him and the past, and began to work on the poem which, I might say, nobody liked at first. But now, is a poem that's in many, many, many anthologies."

POULIN: "Well, the whole genre of father poems seems to have become a favorite topic of a number of poets these days."

HAYDEN: "Well, you know, the search for the father, you know, the search for the spiritual father and all that and."

POULIN: "You mentioned a number of Afro-American writers that were significant to you. What about non Afro-American writers?"

HAYDEN: "Oh, yes. Yeah. Because, inevitably, because, you know, if you care about poetry, certainly as a young person I wasn't -- I didn't care who wrote my poem -- I didn't care who wrote the poems. I mean, if it was good poetry, I sought it out and read it and loved it. And there was a group of us in Detroit at one time who loved John Keats. And we had pretty much decided -- and we were a mixed group, we were black and white. We had pretty much decided that we were all going to try to write immortal lyrics and die at the age of 26, you know [laughter]. Well, for me, 26 has come and gone and I'm not really ready to die yet because I, you know, there's so many things I want to do. But in my early, in my early years, I think Keats was something of an influence. Later on, I -- in the thirties, I discovered Ordon and Yeats and Spender and CJ Lewis and, later on, Gerard Manley Hopkins. I also read Hart Crane and Marian Moore, as a matter of fact, I read everybody I could get my hands on. I mean, I knew everybody when I was -- I sometimes would neglect school to read poetry. And I had a marvelous friend at the Detroit Public Library, Alice Hanson [assumed spelling]. Alice, long since dead, but I did dedicate "Words in the

Mourning Time" in part to her. Alice, Alice Hanson used to see to it that I got all the latest books of poetry. There was a poetry room in the Detroit Public Library which no longer exists, I'm sorry to say. And she would see to it that I got all the new books of poetry because I couldn't afford to buy any, or at least, you know, buy -- I could buy a few off the secondhand tables. And the result was that I was just reading poetry all the time and very much aware of what was going on. And there were some poets who had, whom I tried to imitate. I think Hart Crane was one. And it wasn't until much later in my life that I sort of really read Yeats and have been, and remain, influenced by Yeats in a way. Not in terms of my writing so much, as in terms of my life, in terms of my thinking. Yeats, you see, was an Irish poet, or let me put the other way around, I think of myself as an Afro-American poet in the same way that Yeats was an Irish poet. I have no desire to ignore my heritage, to ignore, let us say, my experiences as an Afro-American. I have no desire to turn away from that and ignore it and so on, any more than Yeats wanted to turn away from being an Irish. At the same time, I don't want to be limited to that. I want to, I want to be able to function as a poet who maybe, you know, touches on all kinds of things. Well, I -- Betsy Graves Reyneau, who was a dear friend and a portrait artist whose work is in the National Portrait Gallery now, placed there after her death. Betsy made a portrait of Yeats which I keep in my study at home and I look at it periodically -- well, I look at it every day when I go into the study. And Yeats's life is somehow an example to me in a strange way that I can't tell you. As a matter of fact, his struggles as an artist who had to come to grips with being Irish, and who was disliked, you know, by the Irish even because he did not do what they expected him to do. Well, you know, I feel myself pretty much in the same, in the same situation very often. And during the sixties, I drew a lot of strength from knowing what Yeats had gone through and so on."

POULIN: "This reference to Yeats obviously leads to some of the statements that you make in your introduction to your anthology, "Kaleidoscope"."

HAYDEN: "Yes."

POULIN: "Introducing yourself, for example, you say that you're opposed to the chauvinistic and the doctrinaire and see no reason why an Afro-American poet should be limited to racial utterance, having his writing judged by standards different from those applied to the work of other poets. And you feel that this is?"

HAYDEN: "Well, this is still, this is still, this is a statement that I, that I stand by. And I had several things in mind there. One thing that I've had in mind, that I have in mind -- or had, and still keep in mind, is the fact that, very often where our work is concerned, well, for the most part, where our work is concerned, well, you know, it's approached as though it were a sociological, a sociological document or a sociological work or a sociological treatise. And what we have to say about our situation as minority people, or as ethnics, and what we have to say about -- and the kind of protest that we make when we do write protest poetry, these things assume an importance that overrides the work as art and allows people to -- or as literature. And it allows people to ignore it as literature and think of it as some kind of social statement all the time. And, yet, when critics and readers go to the work of, say, some of the poets I've mentioned, or even your own poetry, for that matter. They aren't going to be concerned, first of all, with the social implications and so on. They're going to look at it as poetry and see whether or not it's true to the laws that it sets up for itself. They're going to be concerned about whether or not it's really poetry. And then the other point relate to all this, of course, is that I think that there is a tradition. And I thought it was waning, but it's getting even stronger, maybe tradition's not the word I want, but

let it go, among Afro-American poets to emphasize, to emphasize the racial struggle that we experience of the, rather than, rather than other kinds of experience. However, there are some, there are some young people who feel pretty much as I do. They don't want to turn their back on their experiences any more than I do. But they don't want to be limited by those, you know, by racial experience any more than I do. I think of Michael Harper and Jay Wright and a young poet named Herbert Martin and I think Alice Walker, all those, those are young poets who are doing really vivid and splendid work. And they, I think of Michael Harper, for example, who sometimes writes about jazz. He writes about Coltrane and one of his books was called, "Dear John, Dear Coltrane". But Michael is not interested in setting himself apart from other poets, and dealing in some over specialized kind of experience. He tries to write as a poet who is aware of his racial background and so on. But, again, I can only repeat what I've said, not limited by it."

POULIN: "Yeah, I want to pursue this just a little bit further before getting into some poems. But, in that same introduction, you refuse to accept what you call a kind of literary ghetto, on the one hand. And you refuse, implicitly refuse, to be a spokesman for your race. And I wonder if you might expand on that a little bit."

HAYDEN: "Well, I can just sort of gobble along on it as I [laughter], as I do. Well, well, what, you know, what can I say except, you know, except what is there. The -- well, let me go back to this. When I wrote that introduction and, incidentally, that anthology was intended for high school students, and was not to be a trade book at all. But, when it -- and I didn't think that it was anything original or earth-shaking. I tried to make it as good as I could. And a good many of the poets who have come along since that book appeared had not become widely known, or had not published books. But, well to get back to the question you asked though, I feel, I feel that we have been in a kind of, we have been in a kind of literary ghetto. Before the sixties, there were a relatively small number of recognized Afro-American poets. And if you took a course in college in American literature, you might or might not ever hear anything about the best of those poets. You might or might not hear anything about Countee Cullen. And I keep mentioning Countee Cullen because I love him so much. I mean, I knew Countee before -- well, I can't say I knew him, I met him. And had a chance to tell him how much I cared for his poetry, and he liked some things of mine and so on. But, anyway, if you took a course in American Lit, you might or might not ever know anything at all about Afro-American writers. Then, but if you took a course in Negro-American literature as it would have been called in -- before the sixties, then, you see, you wouldn't have had a chance to learn something about it. But you would never have gotten, you would never have gotten the -- you would never have had a clear understanding of the relationship between, say, oh, let's take somebody that you probably don't like. The relationship between -- well, I know, between the new poetry movement which began in 1912 and reached its climax, you know, in the twenties and the Harlem Renaissance. You would have approached the -- or your instructor would have given you the Harlem Renaissance as something almost in a vacuum. And now I thought that that was going to disappear. But I find that, I find that it hasn't. And, today, you go into the, you go into the Black Lit courses and -- or you go into American Lit courses in general and you'll find that, if you really want to know what any of us has done, you've got to go and take the Black Lit, you know, the course in Black Lit. But I think this is all wrong. I think, so far as I am concerned, there's no such thing as black poetry. There's no such thing as white poetry. In America, there's just American poetry, that's all. And I think that it does a lot of harm to keep, to keep this kind of polarization going. I know that some people are capitalizing on this, or profiting from it. And people who might not otherwise have any recognition at all

can stand up and be called poets because they're dealing with a particular kind of subject matter, you know. They're dealing with the liberation of their own people or so they think. But that's -- those are the kind of things I have in mind. There was another part to that, I've forgotten. I've said so many things, I'm sort of wandering here, rambling."

POULIN: "No. One of the things that you bring up leads me to playing devil's advocate in a sense. And that is, what you just expressed, might very well result in certain people accusing you of literary Uncle Tomism. And how would you respond to that?"

HAYDEN: "I respond to it by ignoring it [laughter] because [laughter] because the people who would say that have never read anything. They don't know the past, they don't know, you know, they don't know American literary history. They don't even know the work of, you know, they don't know the work of their own people. And I would just simply dismiss it because it's -- because it is not true. Ralph Ellison is to be judged by the standards that would be applied to any novelist, and not just by some spurious standards that could be created and applied to, you know, to a black novelist. Ellison has been called, as in folk parlance we used to say, you know, he's been called everything but a child of God [laughter]. And I guess that's just something you have to be prepared for. But, I feel, you know, I'm not, I'm not unwilling to stand by these, stand by these things I've said. I think that we are denying something very, very fundamental. You know, we've been in this country for almost 400 years. If anybody's got a stake down here, we have. See, and I personally feel I can trace my folks rather far back. And, on my mother's side, we were, you know, we -- the family came from Pennsylvania. On the foster parents' side, from Kentucky, on my father's side, from Virginia and so on and so forth. And anybody who tells me I don't have a stake down here, you know, is out of his cotton-picking head. What was all that sweating and bleeding and dying about, you know? I had ancestors in the Civil War and who knows, I might have had them in the Revolutionary War for all, you know. And so I know why people, I know why people feel alienated and I know why they feel isolated. But I think that to, to advocate or to support separatism, in any form, is to give aid and comfort to the bigots, you know. I think the Toms are the ones now who are running around being all separate and wanting -- on college campuses, wanting their own dormitories and their own cafeterias and so on. I mean those are the Toms. And I feel that this is something that ought not to be. They really are, they really are giving aid and comfort to the bigots who, you know, if they can get rid of us, push all over to the corner somewhere, then nobody has to bother with us. You don't have to deal with us if we're in a separate dormitory and in separate classrooms, you know, we don't have to be dealt with. So, that's my answer to that."

POULIN: "I want to get on to your own poetry, but I do have one more general question at least. And that comes from your introduction to your anthology, where you say that Afro-American poetry has been shaped over some three centuries by social, moral and literary forces, essentially American."

HAYDEN: "Oh, yes."

POULIN: "And I'd like to know what you understand by essentially American."

HAYDEN: "Well, I go back, again, to the -- well maybe back to the Harlem Renaissance or the new Negro movement. The importance of the Harlem Renaissance is that that, for the first time, Afro-American artists began to get a recognition that they hadn't had before. And they began to work in idioms, or modes, that they had not worked in before. They became [coughing] pardon me -- the novelists became more realistic. The poets became more experimental. And, at the same time that the Harlem

Renaissance which took place in the twenties, ended roughly in the thirties I guess as a movement -- at the same time this was going on, there was developing in America, in general, more realism in the, in fiction. You know, this was the age of Hemingway and Fitzgerald and Dreiser and all the others. There was a movement from the rural to the urban in literature. The poetry, as I say, was experimental and poets were trying to get in as much of so-called reality, or as much of the actual world of automobiles and bathtub gin and all the rest of it as they could, and so on and so forth. Well, American, Afro-American writers were influenced by this, and their work, their work is very similar to the work of other writers in the Jazz age. And because they were reacting to the pressures, they were reacting to the new developments that were occurring in America just the way the other writers were. They certainly weren't living in Kamchatka or Timbuktu, they were living in New York and Detroit and Chicago and they were drawing their material from those, from those sources. And the difference between the writers in the Harlem Renaissance and, say, white writers was that the Harlem Renaissance writers felt they had a purpose. I mean the racial situation had some, had some influence upon them as it, inevitably, would. And they felt that -- many of them felt that they were interpreting the, what was called, the new Negro. And they were presenting new images, new images of Negro life in America. But, despite all the, despite all the influences, or despite all the movements that were taking place abroad at this time, for example, before the First World War, I guess, was Dadaism and then, later, Surrealism, or Dadaism and Surrealism in Paris and so on. But we, of course I wasn't a member of the Harlem Renaissance despite what some people may think, I'm not quite that old [laughter]. But Afro-American writers were very much, very much influenced by what was happening here. And they did exert some influence on other writers too. For example, Van Vechten, Van Vechten wrote stories about Harlem life. They're sort of artificial and phony but, nevertheless, he did it. And Eugene O'Neill's "Emperor Jones" grew out of the interest in the Negro past and the whole emphasis on primitivism and so on, so forth. And which reminds me of a funny, little story that Harlem, the Harlem intellectuals used to sometimes put on a great act of being primitive. And so the people who went up to Harlem slumming, and who believed that Afro-Americans lived a very free and lived a very freewheeling and uninhibited life were sometimes taken in by what was, what was nothing more than a kind of in-joke. And people used to go up to Harlem thinking, oh, they're so primitive and so -- well, they were, you know, they were primitive and crazy like foxes because [laughter], they were putting on an act. And they sometimes succeeded in making people pay for it, you know, go into the nightclubs to see these wonderful primitives who were just as calculating and tough, you know, as anybody. Well, I'm sort of off the subject and I think you see what I mean."

POULIN: "Yeah. It seems to me that an answer to my own question regarding your being accused of Uncle Tomism is answered by a poem called "Night, Death, Mississippi" from "Selected Poems" that is an implicitly, very strong protest poem."

HAYDEN: "Yes, of course."

POULIN: "Without engaging in propaganda. And I would like you to read that, if possible."

HAYDEN: "Yes. Well, that's one of the things that, one of the things that sort of saved, that turned the -- well, how shall I say it? That kept me from being more viciously attacked than I might have been was the fact that, when some of the loudmouthed people who were quick to throw these epithets around, finally got around to reading the work, they were surprised you see. And so on. Well, here's "Night, Death, Mississippi" and I might say, just briefly, that I wrote this poem as a sort of catharsis for myself. I had read about the young Civil Rights workers who were killed in Mississippi and I could hardly bear it. I

could look at my students on the campus I was teaching then at Fisk, I could look at my students on campus and I could imagine that these young people were very much like my students. And it was, it was really very painful. And I could not rest until I wrote this poem, and it took me a long time to sort of bring it off. And it's in two parts, and it's kind of a little, as it turned out, it's kind of a little, kind of a little drama in two parts. "Night, Death, Mississippi".

A quavering cry. Screech-owl?
Or one of them?
The old man in his reek
and gauntness laughs –

One of them, I bet –
and turns out the kitchen lamp,
limping to the porch to listen
in the windowless night.

Be there with Boy and the rest
if I was well again.
Time was. Time was.

White robes like moonlight
In the sweetgum dark.
Unbucked that one then
And him squealing, "Bloody Jesus,"
As we cut it off.

Time was. A cry?
A cry all right.
He hawks and spits,
fevered as by groinfire.

Have us a bottle,
Boy and me –
he's earned him a bottle –
when he gets home.

Part Two

Then we beat them, he said,
beat them till our arms was tired
and the big old chains
messy and red.

O Jesus burning on the lily cross

Christ, it was better
than hunting bear

which don't know why
you want him dead.

O night, rawhead and bloodybones night

You kids fetch Paw
some water now so's he
can wash that blood
off him, she said.

O night betrayed by darkness not its own

Been a long time since I read that and I, I have to get in the mood to read it [laughter]."

POULIN: "I was wondering if you might identify -- I know I've done it in my own mind, but if you might identify a poem of yours that you feel is representative of the folklore, and the dependence on folklore that you spoke about earlier."

HAYDEN: "Let's see, there are several. I think, I think maybe in "Selected Poems", there's one where the folklore is quite obvious, and it's called "Electrical Storm". Is it? Yes, yes, it's "Electrical Storm". Also in "Full Moon", there is some. But "Electrical Storm", I think might be a good, a good one. Do you want me to read it?"

POULIN: "Sure, sure."

HAYDEN: "God's angry with the world again,
the grey neglected ones would say;
He don't like ugly.
Have mercy, Lord, they prayed,
seeing the lightning's
Mene Mene Tekel,
hearing the preaching thunder's deep
Upharsin.
They hunched up, contracting in corners
away from windows and the dog;
huddled under Jehovah's oldtime wrath,
trusting, afraid.

I huddled too, when a boy,
mindful of things they'd told me
God was bound to make me answer for.
But later I was colleged (as they said)
and learned it was not celestial ire
(Beware the infidels, my son)
but pressure systems,
colliding massive energies
that make a storm.
Well for us. . . .

Last night we drove
through suddenly warring weather.
Wind and lightning havocked,
berserked in wires, trees.
Fallen lines we could not see at first
lay in the yard when we reached home.
The hedge was burning in the rain.
Who knows but what
we might have crossed another sill,
had not our neighbors' warning
kept us from our door?
Who knows if it was heavenly design
or chance
(or knows if there's a difference, after all)
that brought us and our neighbors through—
though others died—
the archetypal dangers of the night?

I know what those
cowering true believers would have said.

Now, there are several elements of folklore in this poem, the belief that animals draw lightning. Now, you see, this is not confined to Afro-American people, it's folk, you know. It's a folk belief, it's widespread. And I can remember that, during the thunderstorm, my folks would shoo the dog away, you know, because animals draw lightning so that's in the poem. And then I used to hear my aunt say, "God don't", let's see, "God don't love ugly" and then she would say, "And cares" I won't use the word, "And cares very little for beauty". You see God don't like ugly and cares very little for beauty. I guess that was the folk expression that people, that other people must have used besides her, but I heard her, I heard her use it so that's in the poem. And then the word 'colleged,' you see, Langston Hughes and I laughed over that. As a matter of fact, Langston Hughes once said to me, "Boy, you colleged" and, you know, somebody who'd gone to college, who had some, who had some learning. And, or some education. Then, well that's it and the whole idea of a thunderstorm being a sign of God's displeasure. And, you know, you might, you might get struck by lightning or something and that would mean that God was making you pay for all your sins. And, you know, years and years later, when I was grown and thinking about such things, I used to wonder why God didn't send a thunderstorm and strike down people like Hitler, you know. But it wouldn't have occurred to me, at the time I described in the poem, to question that, you know?"

POULIN: "The reference to Hitler raises another characteristic of your poetry, and that is that you include a variety of nationalities and cultures and draw upon them. You've written a number of poems about Mexico."

HAYDEN: "Yes."

POULIN: "And about Mexican culture. But you've also written some very powerful poems having to do with the Nazi experience. And, maybe implicitly, relating it to the Afro-American experience in this country in terms of reverberation within a given book, a poem like "Belsen, Day of Liberation"."

HAYDEN: "Yes, yes."

POULIN: "Or "From the Corpse Woodpiles, From the Ashes" I think serve as examples. And I wonder if you want to read one of those as -- ."

HAYDEN: "Yes, I would like to read one and I'd like to say that I, you know, I don't consciously look around and say, "Oh, let me see if I can get something out of this", you know that. I mean, you know what your own process is in writing a poem. And how certain subjects just seem to cling to you like burrs, you know. You don't seek them out particularly. I guess what I can say, without sounding like Little Lord Fauntleroy or somebody, is that I do believe in the old Roman statement that Terence or somebody, I mean, I never can remember who made it, that nothing human is foreign to me, you see. And I have known a variety of people in my life, and had many, many experiences. I haven't been abroad, except to Mexico and so I intend to go to Europe and stay as long as I can. But I've known people all over the world and, of course, my poems have gone just about all over the world one way or another. That is, all over -- well, even in Russia. I mean they owe me royalty in Russia which, you know, which I'm sure I'll never get. And I have, I guess I have without making too big a thing of it, I guess maybe I have a worldview. I can't help being affected, or being concerned, which is the same thing, about humanity, you know, wherever. Wherever and however it manifests itself. And that is, that's what I had in mind when I was talking a little while ago about the tendency to restrict those of us who happen not to be white, to restrict us and to expect that we are going to be absolutely, we are going to be concerned always with one particular body of subject matter and not with anything else. I --"

POULIN: "-- I think if I can -- ."

HAYDEN: "-- I can see how a poet could be limited like that, you know. Pardon me?"

POULIN: "Yeah, no. It follows what you were -- what you just said. I think that, as an example of what you were just saying that one of the Nazi poems, perhaps followed by your poem "Sub Specie Aeternitatis" suggests that kind of world view of -- ."

HAYDEN: "-- Yes."

POULIN: "And, perhaps, if you read them in sequence -- ."

HAYDEN: "-- All right."

POULIN: "It would demonstrate what we were -- ."

HAYDEN: "-- All right."

POULIN: "What we were talking about."

HAYDEN: ""Belsen, Day of Liberation"."

POULIN: "That's page 18."

HAYDEN: "Yes. But where is the other one [laughter]? Forgotten where it is. It's in the Mexican section wherever that is. Oh, here it is, yes. "Belsen, Day of Liberation" is dedicated to Rosey Pool. Rosey Pool was a Dutch woman who died a couple of years ago, a marvelous person who was interested in Afro-American poetry long before anybody else was, I guess. And she went to the University of Holland and took her degree and wrote her thesis on Afro-American poetry, I believe. And, later on, Rosey came to

this country and she published, before she came, she had published an anthology called "Beyond the Blues". And I met her and we became fast friends. And she told this story of a little girl who had been in the concentration camp, and I use this story as the basis for the -- or I should say, she told an anecdote about this girl, and I -- little girl. And I use it as a basis for this poem, and here it is, "Belsen, Day of Liberation".

Her parents and her dolls destroyed,
her childhood foreclosed,
she watched the foreign soldiers from
the sunlit window whose black bars

Were crooked crosses inked upon
her pallid face. "Liebchen,
Liebchen, you should be in bed."
But she felt ill no longer.

And, because that day was a holy day
when even the dead, it seemed,
must rise, she was allowed to stay
and see the golden strangers who

Were father, brother and her dream
of God. Afterwards
she said, "They were so beautiful
and they were not afraid."

That's precisely what she, what Rosey said the little girl said. She looked out the window, "They were so beautiful and they were not afraid." And, you know, there's so much, there's so much that lies behind that, you know, behind that statement. What that child must have endured, you know, to say that. Then here's "Sub Specie Aeternitatis" under the aspect of eternity, and this was an old -- what prompted this poem was a visit to a Mexican convent in, oh, my goodness, in Tenochtitlan, yes, it was Tenochtitlan. And well, here it is.

High amid
gothic rocks, the altar stands
that honored once
a tipling, fiercely joyous god.
Far below,
the empty convent lifts
its cross against the dark
invasive as the sun
whose plangent fire
moves like feathered snakes
in trees that shade
the cloister garth.

The curious
may walk the cloister now,
may enter portals barred
to them no longer
and wander
hidden passageways and rooms
of stone, meditating on
such gods as they possess
or they have lost.

Hollow cells
are desolate in their
tranquility
as relic skulls.
Arched windows there
look toward the firegreen mountain
resonant with silence of
a conquered and
defiant god.”

POULIN: “Seems to me that poem says something about any kind of cultural, literary, or religious ghetto that all kind of fall away and.”

HAYDEN: “Mm-hm. The -- it was said often in Mexico and books you read about Mexico, I don't know what -- I think Octavio Paz and some others have made this point one way or another, that the old gods, the old Aztec gods, you know and old Totec gods are still around, you know. They're still around, they haven't died. And some of the fiestas, some of the holy day celebrations, the old gods are out there alongside or statues of the old gods and customs that were observed when the Aztecs and Totecs were worshipping Quetzalcoatl and so on. You know, there's still some, there's still some of that. And I was very much aware of this when I wrote the poem. As a matter of fact, I, at one point, sort of despaired over this poem. I felt it was just too obvious and, I thought, oh goodnight, anybody would think that and so on. But maybe it is, but somehow or other, people who have read it, you know, always like it and so I guess it's all right.”

POULIN: “As usual, our time runs out on us much faster than we, than we expect. And there are a number of other poems that I would have liked to ask you to read and talk about, however, I'd like you to end, if at all possible, with your reading Frederick Douglass. Not only because of the poem itself, but also because, as you may know, Frederick Douglass was a very important figure in this part of the state - .”

HAYDEN: “-- That's right, in Rochester.”

POULIN: “In the Underground Railroad.”

HAYDEN: “Yes.”

POULIN: “And it would seem appropriate to end the, our discussion with a -- .”

HAYDEN: "-- Yes."

POULIN: "With that particular poem, and whatever you might want to say about it."

HAYDEN: "Yes, I -- well, very briefly, because I know our time's running out, I wrote this poem a long, long, long time ago and it appeared in "Atlantic Monthly" in about 1945 or 6, something like that. And nobody paid too much attention to it and I kept revising it and doing things with it. And I think I was attracted to -- well I know I was attracted to Douglass because he's a kind of universal figure. He fought for Afro-American freedom, yes, and that's certainly important. And but for him, where would I be today? But he was also concerned, or I should say, and he was also concerned with woman's suffrage, with temperance, with all the great causes. And I think that, I am a Baha'i, and I think that's another thing that attracted to him is that I see a universality in his outlook. And some sense of the basic unity, the basic oneness of mankind which is a cardinal principle of the Baha'i faith. Well, I think that I better stop there and read the poem because our time is going. "Frederick Douglass".

When it is finally ours, this freedom, this liberty, this beautiful
and terrible thing, needful to man as air,
usable as earth; when it belongs at last to all,
when it is truly instinct, brain matter, diastole, systole,
reflex action; when it is finally won; when it is more
than the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians:
this man, this Douglass, this former slave, this Negro
beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning a world
where none is lonely, none hunted, alien,
this man, superb in love and logic, this man
shall be remembered. Oh, not with statues' rhetoric,
not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze alone,
but with the lives grown out of his life, the lives
fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing."

POULIN: "Robert Hayden, thank you very much."

HAYDEN: "Thank you. Pleasure to be here."

[Music]