**Yusef Komunyakaa**

**Laureate of the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award 2021**

**Ode to the Oud**

Gourd-shaped muse swollen

with wind in the mulberry,

tell me everything you’re made of,

little desert boat of Ra.

Oblong box of Bedouin doves

pecking pomegranate seeds out of the air,

you’re the poet’s persona, his double

in the high priest’s third chamber,

each string a litany of stars over the Sahara.

Pear-shaped traveler, strong but so light,

is there a wishbone holding you together?

I wish I knew how to open you up

with an eagle’s feather or a pick

whittled from buffalo horn,

singing alive the dust of Nubia.

Rosewood seasoned long ago,

I wish I could close your twelve mouths

with kisses. Tongues strung in a row,

I wish I could open every sound in you.

I envy one blessed to master himself

by rocking you in his lonely arms.

Little ship of sorrow, bend your voice

till the names of heroes & courtesans,

birds & animals, prayers & love songs,

swarm from your belly.

**Ode to the Maggot**

Brother of the blowfly

& godhead, you work magic

Over battlefields,

In slabs of bad pork

& flophouses. Yes, you

Go to the root of all things.

You are sound & mathematical.

Jesus Christ, you're merciless

With the truth. Ontological & lustrous,

You cast spells on beggars & kings

Behind the stone door of Caesar's tomb

Or split trench in a field of ragweed.

No decree or creed can outlaw you

As you take every living thing apart. Little

Master of earth, no one gets to heaven

Without going through you first.

**Cape Coast Castle**I made love to you, & it loomed there.We sat on the small veranda of the cottage,& listened hours to the sea talk.I didn't have to look up to see if it was still there.For days, it followed us along polluted beacheswhere the boys herded cows& the girls danced for the boys,to the money changer,& then to the marketplace.It went away when the ghost of my motherfound me sitting beneath a palm,but was in the van with us on a road trip to the countryas we zoomed past thatch houses.It was definitely there when a few dollarsexchanged hands & we were hurriedthrough customs, past the guards.I was standing in the airport in Amsterdam,sipping a glass of red wine, half lost in Van Gogh'sswarm of colors, & it was there, brooding in a corner.I walked into the public toilet, thinking of W.E.B.buried in a mausoleum, & all his books & papersgoing to dust, & there it was, in that private moment,the same image: obscene because it was builtto endure time, stronger than their houses & altars.The seeds of melon. The seeds of gumbo in trade windsheaded to a new world. I walked back into the throngof strangers, but it followed me. I could see the pathslaves traveled, & I knew when they first saw itall their high gods knelt on the ground.Why did I taste salt water in my mouth?We stood in line for another plane,& when the plane rose over the cityI knew it was there, crossing the Atlantic.Not a feeling, but a longing. I was in Accraagain, gazing up at the vaulted cathedral ceilingof the compound. I could see the ships at duskrising out of the lull of “Amazing Grace,” crestingthe waves. The governor stood on his balcony,holding a sword, pointing to a womanin the courtyard, saying, That one.

Bring me that tall, ample wench.Enslaved hands dragged her to the center,

then they threw buckets of water on her,but she tried to fight. They pinned her to the ground.She was crying. They prodded her up the stairs. One step,& then another. Oh, yeah, she still had some fight in her,but the governor's power was absolute. He said,There's a tyranny of language in my fluted bones.There's poetry on every page of the good book.There's God's work to be done in a forsaken land.There's a whole tribe in this one, but I'll break thembefore they're in the womb, before they're conceived,before they're even thought of. Come, up here,don't be afraid, up here to the governor's quarters,up here where laws are made. I haven't delivered the head of Pompey or John the Baptiston a big silver tray, but I own your past,present, & future. You're special.You're not like the others. Yes,I'll break you with fists & cat-o-nine.I'll thoroughly break you, head to feet,but sister I'll break you most dearlywith sweet words.

**English**When I was a boy, he says, the sky began burning,& someone ran knocking on our doorone night. The house became birdsin the eaves too low for a boy's ears.I heard a girl talking, but they weren't words.I knew one good thing: a girlwas somewhere in our house speaking slow as a sailor's parrot.I glimpsed Alice in Wonderland.Her voice smelled like an orange,though I'd never peeled an orange.I knocked on the walls, in a circle.The voice was almost America.My ears plucked a word out of the air.She said, Friend. I eased open the doorhidden behind overcoats in a closet.The young woman was smiling at me.She was teaching herself a languageto take her far, far away,

& she taught me a word each day to keep a secret.But one night I woke to other voices in the house.A commotion downstairs & a pleading. There are promises made at nightthat turn into stones at daybreak.From my window, I saw the starsburning in the river brighter than a bigcelebration. I waited for her return,with my hands over my mouth.I can't say her name, because it wasdangerous in our house so close to the water.Was she a boy's make-believe friendor a beehive breathing inside the walls?

Years later, my aunts said two German soldiersshot the girl one night beside the Vistula.This is how I learned your language.It was long ago. It was springtime.

**The Blue Hour**

A procession begins in the blue-

black gratitude between worlds,

& The Rebirth Jazz Band

marches out of what little light

is left among the magnolia blooms.

Step here, & one steps off

the edge of the world. Step there,

& one enters the unholy hour

where one face bleeds into another

as a horse-drawn buggy

rolls out of the last century,

& the red-eyed seventeen-year locust

grows deeper into the old hushed soil.

Lean this way, a blue insinuation

takes over the body. Step here,

& one's shadow stops digging its grave

to gaze up at the evening star. Or,

at this moment, less than a half step

between day & night, birdhouses

stand like totems against the sky.

A flicker of wings & eyes,

mockingbirds arrive with stolen songs

& cries, their unspeakable lies & omens

as if they are some minor god's

only true instrument & broken way

on stage in the indigo air.

They come with *uh huh & yeah,*

a few human words, to white boxes

on twelve-foot poles,

to where each round door-hole

is a way in

& a way out of oblivion.