



1. My Muse (00:50)
2. Fray Pareja's Questions: A Timucuan Midwife Responds (03:04)
3. Boone Goes West (00:53)
4. Rumors of Discontent (01:50)
5. Needle Carries the Thread (02:56)
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Album notes

Kabbalists tell us that what happens above (in the spiritual realm) is reflected below (in the material world); likewise, they warn us that what happens in the material world below affects the spiritual realm above. Thus, human action can lead to a better or worse world down here, but much more than that: poor behavior by people can impact the spiritual realm negatively, which in turn will impact the material world negatively, and so on in a vicious downward spiral of increasing misery. Such influence places an enormous responsibility on humans to behave ethically and correctly: what we do can either strengthen or weaken not just the seen but also the unseen. The very fate of heaven and earth, in other words, is at the heart of every choice.

Keith Cartwright's poetry focuses expertly on the power and responsibility inherent in human choice, though his perspective is horizontal: rather than considering the vertical relationship between people and the gods, Cartwright places his finger on encounters between peoples, cultures, and beliefs. In such encounters, the gods are but another reason for us to tear each other apart. In "Fray Pareja's Questions – a Timuquan Midwife Responds," we listen as the Spanish Franciscan friar Francisco Pareja's questions echo his Confessionario. The Confessionario, written by Pareja early in 17th Century Spanish Florida, is a book designed to take a Native convert or would-be-convert through the sacrament of confession: the goal is to suggest, via leading questions, sins to confess.

In Cartwright's nimble telling, the questions lead to answers that challenge the very concept of sin itself – the heart, as it were, of Christian belief. Faced with the question "When the owl sings have you believed it to be an omen of evil?", the Timucuan midwife thrusts back at the (celibate) friar:

[W]hen the moon rises
and the owl cries *who* do you want a woman
to be filled with your escape from the truth
are women evil do you hear omens
when we sing at night what does it mean
to the moon to the owl to a woman
if you think of them

The Timucuan woman is basically asking, "What does it matter to me what you consider evil?" The answer, of course, is both nothing and everything. The pathos here is that we are witnessing a confrontation whose outcome we already know: the Timucuan people will be exterminated by violence and disease and marginalization, and Europeans and their cultures and beliefs and prejudices and short-sightedness will occupy and dominate an entire continent. Be careful, Cartwright warns us, of what world you want to bring about because it may very well be someone else's definition of evil.

Cartwright returns to this sort of conundrum throughout his poems. In “Rumors of Discontent,” pre-Civil War abolitionists and others helping slaves to run away to the North or to revolt (the ambiguity deftly reflects the subjective nature of perception) are framed as either demons or saints, depending on perspective. To the members of the pro-slavery Committees of Safety, escape maps or possible coded exchanges between conspiring slaves are “demonic signs charcoaled on burlap,” and they are troubled by the unholy (to them) names of “Gabriel, Nat, Toussaint.” Toussaint (French for “all saints”) is of course Toussaint Louverture, leader of the 1791 Haitian slave revolution, perhaps the slave-owning South’s greatest nightmare, and, in their minds, the inspiration for Gabriel’s slave rebellion in 1800 (note how Cartwright chooses an archangel as one of the three names on this list) and Nat Turner’s slave rebellion in 1831.

By contrast, to the escaping or would-be rebel slaves huddled in a basement not too far away, the signs they read are “suffused with saints: / Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John,” and they divine a course of action using “the blood [this blade] it’s drawn . . . a guinea hen’s blood.” Clearly, what some people think of as death magic and unholy others see as sacred and life-saving. Without saying so (he doesn’t have to, the images speak for themselves), Cartwright illustrates the danger of treating others as less than: less human, less sacred, less deserving of even one’s own God’s love. But the poem does not stop there: the syncretism at its heart (African religions, Christian saints) points triumphantly though of course poignantly to a time when the fact that America has always been multicultural will no longer be hidden underground but can come to the surface and bloom. That we live in times in which this multiculturalism at the heart of America is under threat means the poem can’t help but read like a warning of what terrible times could return if we repeat the mistakes of the past.

A related poem, “Needle Carries the Thread,” explores the fears a dominant culture can weaponize to justify as preemptive self-defense the atrocities it commits against a scapegoat minority. Fear of a slave uprising like Haiti’s was, of course, the leading justification for the cruel and punitive treatment slaves were subject to in the South – no such mass rebellion ever materialized anywhere in North America, but fear of it drove slave owners to paroxysms of torture and murder. That such acts were condoned and even praised by so-called Christians does not escape Cartwright’s attention:

Needle that carries the thread
through fears so familiar I swear
they crossed here from there ...
the woman even the tortured wouldn’t name
held six lifted heads
in the torchlight of her eyes, their blood
already rusting
the railroad spikes forgings
to long iron tollings of the Baptist bell . . .

“The woman even the tortured wouldn’t name” is a hoodoo practitioner or priestess, and she gets the last word in the poem. After torturing and executing slaves suspected of planning a rebellion, the slave owners force the remaining slaves to march under the impaled heads of the murdered ones. The woman in question walks away from the horror and has a vision of the future. She sees,

[T]he Committee
of Safety poked in prison camps,
decapitated by grapeshot at Shiloh,
pillared homes gone to ash ...

widows and orphans of the Lost Cause
closing their quilted paths
in the steely eye of God’s needle . . .

The poem ends with an image of “buzzard wings, / like dark magi, roosting / beneath one long bright star.” So much is packed into those images: St. Paul’s “For whatever a man sows, this he will also reap;” Lincoln quoting the Psalms, “The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether;” and “Malcom X’s “chickens coming home to roost” comment on the Kennedy assassination. And consider the implications of buzzards as “dark magi” juxtaposed with the Messianic “long” bright star – not merely a long, trailing comet tail, but long awaited, long in coming, long in the making, long suffering, longing. This is masterful writing, plain and simple.

Cartwright’s poems astound with their breadth and depth. In them we meet Daniel Boone and Jennifer Lopez; find Odysseus visting La Huasteca (the Huastec people’s ancestral homeland on the Gulf of Mexico, but also a feminine name that could refer to the poem’s titular muse); and learn of how Brer Bouki built a banjo in Alabama in a tale that summons the Wolof hyena-trickster of the same name, Uncle Bouqui of Haitian folklore, and of course Brer Rabbit, managing in the process to touch upon the complex dynamics of slavery in Africa and the Americas). But at their heart, these poems are extraordinary because they carry both intellectual and emotional heft. They are complex explorations of complex issues: conquest, slavery, exploitation, faith, the power and limits of perception, and the dark side of zeal. Cartwright speaks truth to history and in the process the reader becomes a witness to events that continue to shape our lives to this day. What we do today, Cartwright says, will have consequences long after we are gone. We must choose with care, he tells us, because our choices are creating the world we and our descendants will have to live in for decades and centuries to come. If there is a more timely lesson to be learned at this moment in history, I don’t know what it is. –Andres Rojas

Credits

All poems by Keith Cartwright and read by the author except, "My Muse II," read by Paige Perez and "Fray Pareja's Questions: A Timucuan Midwife Responds," read by Paige Perez and Keith Cartwright.

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Cover photo by Daniel Pike

Cover Design by Michael Boyles

Track 2, "Fray Pareja's Questions: A Timucuan Midwife Responds," appeared in SENECA REVIEW; Track 3, "Boone Goes West," appeared in THE DISTILLERY; Track 4, "Rumors of Discontent," appeared in BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL; Track 5, "Needle Carries the Thread," appeared in NEW ORLEANS REVIEW; Track 6, "Brer Bouki Builds a Banjo" appeared in SHENANDOAH and online at www.poetryfoundation.org; Track 7, "Home Remedy Against Sudden Tragedy," appeared in THE FINCASTLE HERALD.



With thanks for a fellowship from Virginia Center for the Arts. –Keith Cartwright

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