

## The Paradise of Danez Smith’s “summer, somewhere”

*Don't Call Us Dead.* Danez Smith. Graywolf, 2017. 96 pp. \$16.00 (paper)

In year three of the COVID pandemic, I’m still craving refuge, and poems remain one of my go-to sites of sanctuary. Frost once called poetry a “momentary stay against confusion”—so whether it’s “sheltering-in-place” or just wanting to escape the noise of my mortal worry, I’ve found great relief in taking up temporary tenancy in a poem that offers an evanescent, shimmering vision of a someplace else.

I’m not alone in this. Part of being human, it seems, is to seek a vision of a Somewhere. The Place of No Wind, the Spirit World, Elysian Fields, Field of the Host, the Walled Enclosure, the Lofty Waters, the Bosom of Abraham, the Garden (al-Jannah), the Eternal Reward, the Light of Your Face—across cultures and time, people have named the place where we go when we pass from this life into whatever’s after: the infinite, the oneness, the arms of God—whatever one’s choice of metaphor. I love how earthy these place names are. We cannot imagine Heaven or Afterlife or God without metaphors—for example, like the image of using rungs of a ladder to ascend (or descend, depending on your topology of what’s next).

This poetry that seeks paradise is also evocative of John Paul Lederach’s notion of the moral imagination: “the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist.” It’s occasionally a poetry of the future tense, but a future tense merging into the now. I think of Yeats’s “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”—“I will arise and go now . . .”—how he offers us a vision of what he is about to build on that island, an imminent future tense of the peace just across the water. The best poems of paradise, like Danez Smith’s wrenchingly gorgeous “summer,

somewhere,” are able, at once, to acknowledge the suffering that is stitched into existence but also somehow to bracket it, decenter it, let it be. The suffering that fuels the longing for the infinite, the poems of paradise assure us, will not have the final word. Such poems shine a light in the cold dark of our hurt and dread. In fact, as “summer, somewhere” developed from a tight slam piece with four basic movements to a rangy multisectioned poetic sequence of twenty pages, it retained its core dream-vision of and hope for a world without police murder of Black people.

I first encountered an early version of Danez Smith’s “summer, somewhere”—a recent poem that continues to haunt me, with each rereading—on a Button Poetry video called “Alternate Heaven for Black Boys” in 2016, a film that’s been watched well over seventy-five thousand times. (I have contributed at least one hundred of those viewings.) Smith’s performance is nothing short of electrifying. Their voice begins peacefully, slowly, then rises, insistent, desperate, ferocious, then falls again, then rises in crescendo—the map of its tonal movement something like a great pop song, its peaks and valleys growing deeper and taller as we move through its landscape. This isn’t a poem, it’s a prophecy, an exorcism of white supremacy and its ravages.

In that first version, in what become the first three couplets in print (fyi: this essay’s quotes are from the version published in Smith’s 2017 book), Smith initiates the vision slowly, calmly:

somewhere, a sun. below, boys brown  
as rye play the dozens & ball, jump

in the air & stay there. boys become new  
moons, gum-dark on all sides, beg bruise

-blue water to fly, at least tide, at least  
spit back a father or two. I won’t get started.

Smith’s summer place is full of brown boys whose skin is the color of “rye,” an orange-brown grain grown in their native Minnesota, a nod to the pastoral. But these boys aren’t the shepherds of yore: they roast each other, they’re ballers who “jump // in the air & stay there,” the enjambment itself holding those boys up. (I think of Gwendolyn Brooks’s centering of those pool players in “We Real Cool” through enjambment.) Smith’s muscular, sensuous, fleshy language—with its alliterations, internal and slant rhymes, and assonance—

celebrates the selves of those boys. But the mention of the lost fathers turns the tone (both on the page, and in their reading) to that of suffering:

history is what it is. it knows what it did.  
bad dog. bad blood. bad day to be a boy  
  
color of a July well spent. but here, not earth  
not heaven, we can't recall our white shirts  
  
turned ruby gowns. here, there's no language  
for *officer* or *law*, no color to call *white*.  
  
if snow fell, it'd fall black. please, don't call  
us dead, call us alive someplace better.  
  
we say our own names when we pray.  
we go out for sweets & come back.

Just as quickly as history irrupts into this scene, Smith talks the boys back, pushes them outside of the “here.” We know, even in the poem, what’s happened *there*, where the boys have been shot, where the words *officer*, *law*, and *white* not only exist but rule cruelly. Even blood on a shirt is seen as a “ruby gown.” It goes without saying that Trayvon, Michael, Tamir, and countless others hover close by. (In the final printed version of the poem, Smith name-checks a number of the murdered young men throughout.)

But in this alternate heaven, their murderers don’t have the final say. Instead, the boys are their own gods—the line “we say our own names when we pray” reminds me of Paul D’s beautiful words at the end of *Beloved* (Knopf, 1987): “You your best thing, Sethe.”

In the second movement of the slam version, Smith’s alternate heaven, this someplace, dilates into an everywhere, a paradise “where everything / is sanctuary & nothing is a gun”:

do you know what it's like to live  
on land who loves you back?  
  
no need for geography  
now, we safe everywhere.  
  
point to whatever you please  
& call it church, home, or sweet love.

paradise is a world where everything  
is a sanctuary & nothing is a gun.

here, if it grows it knows its place  
in history. yesterday, a poplar

told me of old forest  
heavy with fruits i'd call uncle

bursting red pulp & set afire  
harvest of dark wind chimes.

after I fell from its limb  
it bandaged me in sap.

In the space of the astonishing utterance, the “here” of the poem’s reading and speaking, a paradise comes into being. Where Black boys are safe. Where trees have fruit that is *not* strange (perhaps a nod to the devastating song “Strange Fruit” and the legacy of lynching). For the span of the poem, Smith has created a visionary site where Black people are in a place “that loves . . . back.”

In the third movement of the poem, Smith’s speaker reflects on their memories of the life before the Somewhere, drawing out a mythic vision redolent of the old myths of river crossings (from Styx to the Ohio River), the Spirituals and their rivers, and the drowning of Emmett Till:

there, i drowned, back before, once.  
there, i knew how to swim, but couldn’t.

there, men stood by shore & watched me blue.  
there, i was a dead fish, the river’s prince.

there, i had a face & then didn’t.  
there, my mother cried over me, open casket

but i wasn’t there. i was here, by my own  
water, singing a song i learned somewhere

south of somewhere worse.  
now, everywhere i am is

the center of everything. i must  
be the lord of something.

what was i before? a boy? a son?  
a warning? a myth? i whistled

now i'm the god of whistling.  
i built my Olympia downstream.

What begins as a description of murder by drowning turns into an apotheosis in which the speaker is no longer a passive victim but “the center of everything . . . the lord of something . . . the god of whistling.”

In the concluding lines of “Alternate Heaven,” Smith admonishes their listener/reader to “go home:”

you are not welcome here. trust  
the trip will kill you. go home.

we earned this paradise  
by a death we didn't deserve.

i'm sure there are other heres.  
a somewhere for every kind

of somebody, a heaven of brown  
girls braiding on golden stoops

but here—  
                  how could i ever explain to you—

                  someone prayed we'd rest in peace  
                  & here we are

                  in peace           whole           all summer

Smith's final move is to eject us from paradise, those of us who haven't died as a result of anti-Black or racist violence. As audience, we're caught in the discomfiting realization that the only ticket to this heaven requires our murder. Smith's expulsion is not exclusivism but an insistence on the reality of the suffering of Black people. Yet even in that move, the poem promises that there are “other heres . . . for every kind / of somebody.” “summer, somewhere” is a poem incredibly canny about audience—centering Black boys yet at the same time opening up a window to create spaces for others who face their own threats. The poem's final sense of peace, buoyed by the belief that somebody

has prayed for the “us” of the poem, these black boys, resonates beyond the poem’s end, amplified by the white spaces between words in the final line—as if the words were clouds floating across the sky.

In subsequent versions, Smith drops the initial title, “Alternate Heaven for Black Boys,” and changes it to “summer, somewhere”—published on the page first in *Poetry* in 2016, and then as the first poem in the collection *Don’t Call Us Dead* (Graywolf, 2017), the title of which comes from the poem itself. Smith’s new title strips away the blinking-neon certainty of the original version and invites the reader into participating in the vision of this Somewhere. Smith is our Beatrice, walking us through their own Paradiso. For the version in *Poetry*, Smith added five new sections, like this one:

if you press your ear to the dirt  
you can hear it hum, not like it’s filled

with beetles & other low gods  
but like a tongue rot with gospel

& other glories. listen to the dirt  
crescendo a kid back.

come. celebrate. this  
is everyday. everyday

holy. everyday high  
holiday. everyday new

year. every year, days get longer.  
time clogged with boys. the boys

O the boys. they still come  
in droves. the old world

keeps choking them. our new one  
can’t stop spitting them out.

In this and the other additional sections, Smith echoes Lucille Clifton’s “won’t you celebrate with me” at least twice, writing elsewhere of “starshine”—yet the joy is freighted down with “the old world” that “keeps choking them.”

Smith would complete the poem with an additional eleven sections for *Don’t Call Us Dead*, including italicized sections on facing pages aligned to the

book's center that give voice to a grieving person left behind (at times figured as a mother, at others as a lover) as well as to the Black boys in the Somewhere. These sections seem to press together, divided, irrevocably, by the book's spine. The mother/lover voices, in particular, haunt like unhealed wounds:

*when i want to kiss you  
i kiss the ground.*

*i shout down sirens.  
they bring no safety.*

*my king turned my ache  
my one turned into my nothing.*

It's as if Smith wanted to spend more time inside that Somewhere, building that world beyond its initial length. We know—even in the joyous immersion in the otherworld of a beautiful poem—that it will end, that we must return to the world where so many of us are not safe. Like the great poems of paradise, from Dante to Yeats, “summer, somewhere” does not sell its reader a fantasy of heaven but instead shares a prophetic vision that names society's ills and offers the dream of something better. That shimmering vision is what remains with us—clutched close to us, like we would hold a child as we cross a dangerous street—as we head toward a Somewhere.