

RIOT

GWENDOLYN BROOKS

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It would be a terrible thing for Chicago if this black fountain of life should suddenly erupt. My friend assures me there's no danger of that. I don't feel so sure about it.

Maybe he's right. Maybe the Negro will always be our friend, no matter what we do to him.

HENRY MILLER

from *Sunday After the War*.

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"Allah Shango," by Jeff Donaldson

This painting was the Purchase Award Winner at the exhibit "Black Expressions '69" at the Southside Community Art Center, Chicago.



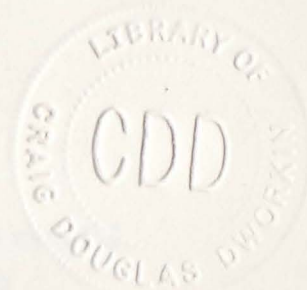
GWENDOLYN BROOKS

Frontispiece by Jeff Donaldson

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NOTE

The first part of this poem was commissioned in April of 1968 by Don L. Lee, an editor of the Chicago magazine *Black Expression*.

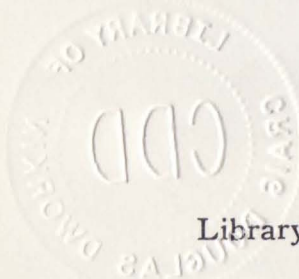
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For Dudley Randall,
a giant in our time.

A POEM IN THREE PARTS

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RIOT

A riot is the language of the unheard.
—MARTIN LUTHER KING

John Cabot, out of Wilma, once a Wycliffe,
all whitebluerose below his golden hair,
wrapped richly in right linen and right wool,
almost forgot his Jaguar and Lake Bluff;
almost forgot Grandtully (which is The
Best Thing That Ever Happened To Scotch);
almost

forgot the sculpture at the Richard Gray
and Distelheim; the kidney pie at Maxim's,
the Grenadine de Boeuf at Maison Henri.

Because the Negroes were coming down the
street.

Because the Poor were sweaty and unpretty
(not like Two Dainty Negroes in Winnetka)
and they were coming toward him in rough ranks.
In seas. In windsweep. They were black and loud.
And not detainable. And not discreet.

Gross. Gross. "*Que tu es grossier!*" John Cabot
itched instantly beneath the nourished white
that told his story of glory to the World.
"Don't let It touch me! the blackness! Lord!" he
whispered
to any handy angel in the sky.

But, in a thrilling announcement, on It drove
and breathed on him: and touched him. In that
breath
the fume of pig foot, chitterling and cheap chili,
malign, mocked John. And, in terrific touch, old
averted doubt jerked forward decently,
cried "Cabot! John! You are a desperate man,
and the desperate die expensively today."

John Cabot went down in the smoke and fire
and broken glass and blood, and he cried "Lord!
Forgive these niggus that know not what
they do."

THE THIRD SERMON ON THE WARPLAND

Phoenix

"In Egyptian mythology, a bird which
lived for five hundred years and then
consumed itself in fire, rising re-
newed from the ashes."

—WEBSTER

The earth is a beautiful place.
Watermirrors and things to be reflected.
Goldenrod across the little lagoon.

The Black Philosopher says
"Our chains are in the keep of the Keeper
in a labeled cabinet
on the second shelf by the cookies,
sonatas, the arabesques
There's a rattle, sometimes.
You do not hear it who mind only
cookies and crunch them.
You do not hear the remarkable music—'A
Death Song For You Before You Die.'
If you could hear it
you would make music too.
The *blackblues*."

West Madison Street.
In "Jessie's Kitchen"
nobody's eating Jessie's Perfect Food.
Crazy flowers
cry up across the sky, spreading
and hissing *This is*
it.

The young men run.

They will not steal Bing Crosby but will steal
Melvin Van Peebles who made Lillie
a thing of Zampoughi a thing of red wiggles and
trebles
(and I know there are twenty wire stalks sticking
out of her head
as her underfed haunches jerk jazz.)

A clean riot is not one in which little rioters
long-stomped, long-straddled, BEANLESS
but knowing no Why
go steal in hell
a radio, sit to hear James Brown
and Mingus, Young-Holt, Coleman, John,
on V.O.N.
and sun themselves in Sin.

However, what
is going on
is going on.

Fire.

That is their way of lighting candles in the
darkness.

A White Philosopher said

'It is better to light one candle than curse the
darkness.'

These candles curse—
inverting the deeps of the darkness.

GUARD HERE, GUNS LOADED.

The young men run.

The children in ritual chatter
scatter upon
their Own and old geography.

The Law comes sirening across the town.

A woman is dead.
Motherwoman.
She lies among the boxes
(that held the haughty hats, the Polish sausages)
in newish, thorough, firm virginity
as rich as fudge is if you've had five pieces.
Not again shall she
partake of steak
on Christmas mornings, nor of nighttime
chicken and wine at Val Gray Ward's
nor say
of Mr. Beetley, Exit Jones, Junk Smith
nor neat New-baby Williams (man-to-many)
"He treat me right."

That was a gut gal.

"We'll do an us!" yells Yancey, a twittering
twelve.

"Instead of your deathintheafternoon,
kill 'em, bull!
kill 'em, bull!"

The Black Philosopher blares
"I tell you, *exhaustive* black integrity
would assure a blackless America. . . ."

Nine die, Sun-Times will tell
and will tell too
in small black-bordered oblongs "*Rumor? check it
at 744-4111.*"

A Poem to Peanut.

"Coooooooool!" purrs Peanut. Peanut is
Richard—a Ranger and a gentleman.
A Signature. A Herald. And a Span.
This Peanut will not let his men explode.
And Rico will not.
Neither will Sengali.
Nor Bop nor Jeff, Geronimo nor Lover.
These merely peer and purr,
and pass the Passion over.
The Disciples stir
and thousandfold confer
with ranging Rangemen;
mutual in their "Yeah!—
this AIN'T all upinheah!"

"But WHY do These People offend *themselves*?"
say they
who say also "It's time.
It's time to help
These People."

Lies are told and legends made.
Phoenix rises unafraid.

The Black Philosopher will remember:
"There they came to life and exulted,
the hurt mute.
Then it was over.

The dust, as they say, settled."

AN ASPECT OF LOVE, ALIVE IN THE ICE AND FIRE

LaBohem Brown

It is the morning of our love.

In a package of minutes there is this We.
How beautiful.

Merry foreigners in our morning,
we laugh, we touch each other,
are responsible props and posts.

A physical light is in the room.

Because the world is at the window
we cannot wonder very long.

You rise. Although
genial, you are in yourself again.
I observe
your direct and respectable stride.
You are direct and self-accepting as a lion
in African velvet. You are level, lean,
remote.

There is a moment in Camaraderie
when interruption is not to be understood.
I cannot bear an interruption.
This is the shining joy;
the time of not-to-end.

On the street we smile.
We go
in different directions
down the imperturbable street.

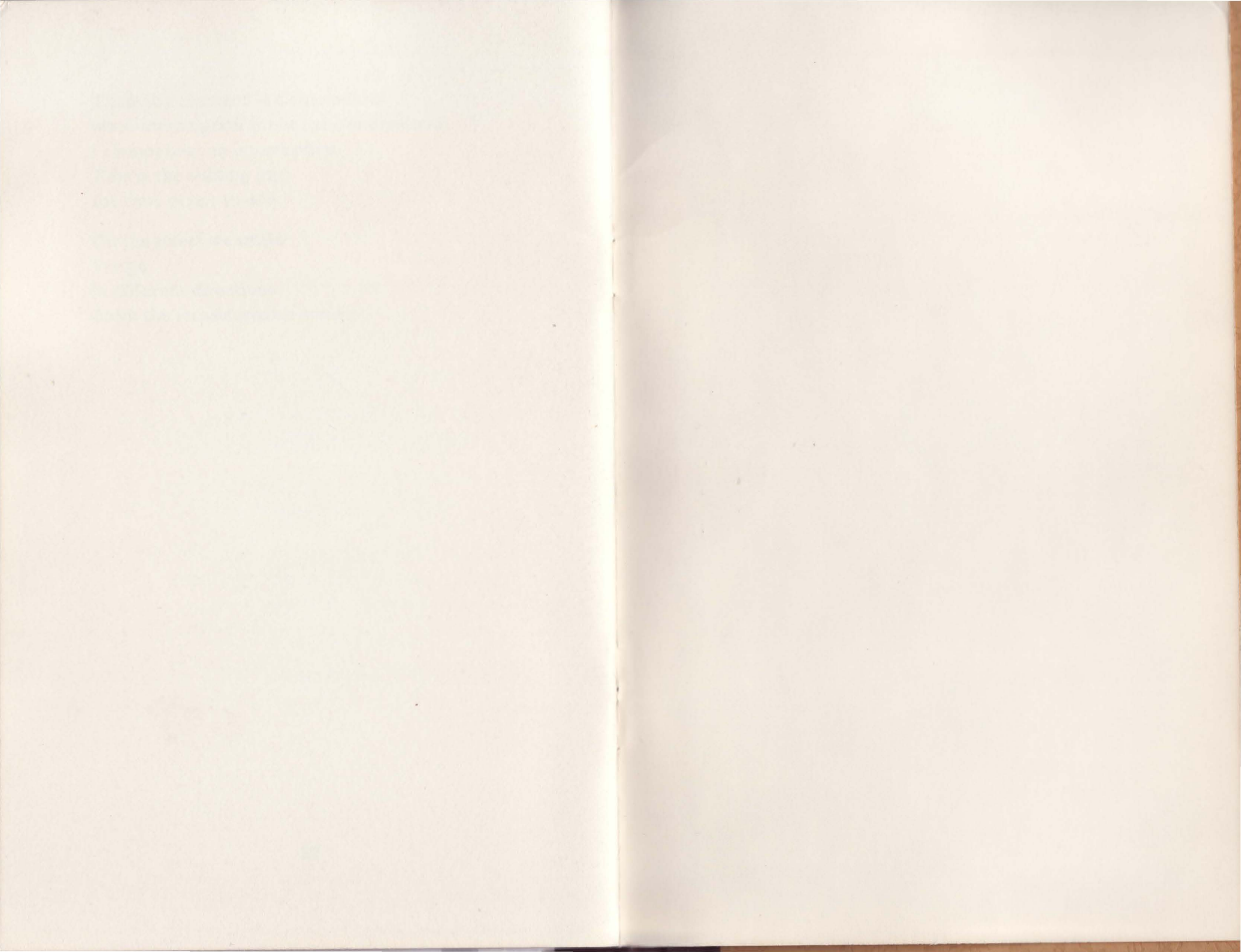




PHOTO BY ROY LEWIS

RIOT is a poem in three parts, only one part of which has appeared in print before. It arises from the disturbances in Chicago after the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968.

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