

CLIO

*'As a black person and a woman I don't read
history for facts, I read it for clues.'*

There is no story to tell that is more important than the story I tell you with my own lips, own tongue, own head. Clio is a woman with her head fixed assuredly upon her shoulders. Around her neck settle beads. I touched them once. She reproached me. I knew I had committed a crime, if a woman can be guilty of an act which she does not know to be transgression. In any case I'm sure she forgave me. But the spirits sure as hell didn't. Next morning I got out of bed to find the entire contents of the linen cupboard laid systematically in the middle of the bathroom floor. Spirits we decided. But who. But whose. Those beads. I could feel them run under my fingers. I could hear the ebonite resonance of her voice, *'I'll take them off if you want me to'* she intoned, and she did. I felt such a fool. But then life is lesson worth learning. It seems.

Her private thoughts about friends and lovers, parents passing on, academic worries do not betray themselves on the surface. They swim fluidly just underneath in the shallow layer of time between the moment observed and the moment of observance. So if you look you might think that you see a shadow cross her face or a shimmer of near tearfulness at the edge of her eye but then you could not now say if you could see these things from a point of uninformedness. And why should you know. What has it got to do with you?

Clio is a woman with her head fixed assuredly upon her shoulders. Around her wrist is a bracelet given to her by a strange woman when she was passing through New York last summer. She stopped her on Bleeker Street and said *'Hey sister you sure do look just like my mother. I aint seen my mother in years. She just hasn't been*

in touch. I aint seen my mother in so many years but there is no doubt that you are her double. In fact if you wasn't so young I would be sure, though her milk fed me and her belly bore me, that you were her, just like she was when she was young. You aint that young but you still aint old enough to be my mother. I sure wish you was.' Clio had been in a hurry to get over to the library but felt that this woman was so lonely for her mother, and Clio's mother had just been over to visit her from England, and she thought well what the heck. A minute or two she'll be gone and I probably won't ever see her again. And it's daylight and I can take care of myself. Lulled into a false sense of security, not life threatening it transpired, before she knew it light flared straight in her eyes. She gasped at its brutality. *'Hey'*, she shouted but before she could continue the woman said *'Here sis my name is Cleopatra I just had to have a photograph of you. This camera is automatic, cant control that damn flash.'* *'For free?'*, asked Clio sarcastically. *'No, not at all. Here take this'*, her fat mop wringing hand held out that self same bracelet you can see there.

The stranger pushed past her then stopped to whisper in her ear, *'If you ever need money, if you need money real bad, take that bracelet to a dealer, but only one who knows their stuff and that you trust. Tell them this is 18th dynasty. They can check my statue in Leiden. It's worth money you know, real money, but Honey I could sell it and I'm cleaning floors. I'm waiting for the chance to be myself in movies but so far they give the part to fat white Euro-broads who couldn't stand in the sun for more than a moment. Me I would meditate in the desert in the heat of the day. Commune with the Elder. You know. Like you did today in Washington Square. Honey I don't need money. But I need you to know me.'*

Clio (Portrait of Dorothea Smartt) 1989

Cibachrome print and gilt frame, Courtesy of Touchstones Rochdale

TERPSICHORE

'Transmitting our stories by word of mouth does not possess archival permanence. Survival is visibility.'

Fools gold is all the sugar cane held. Its sweetness rots the root of the tooth the root of the tree the root of the creation. She holds it in her black hand the same hand which rested upon my arm when we knew each other only vaguely. She knew that what she needed could not come from only one friend. There in a cold northern city transported to an institution which cared little for her beauty or her talent or her sightfulness. There she glimpsed other travellers on the same blood red road some she recognised from travellers at home, some their place of origin she could only guess at. No dog tags or fiery stamps were visible to the casual glance and any encounter more intimate than that put both the viewer and the viewed at risk. Risk.

Slaughter lay a trail of bones from the gold coast to the east coast the south coast to the caribbean and other lines of transportation between. Those bones calcified the ocean bed which now reeks with the effluent of post-industrial carnage. Layered over carnage, fools gold that's all it is. Too many fools, too little time.

For sugar in your tea and a maid to sleep at the foot of your bed, for silks to wear on your translucent greenly shimmering flesh and a maid to service your husband when you are too tired to engage in your conjugal rights. For gold to wear on your bosom and a maid to tell you that you are beautiful although your wig reeks and is infested with lice, for right to possess the last unicorns horn and a maid bought at auction to service your motherly duties.

For these things you have laid your dignity in the mud of history and we shall not forget.

For sugar in your tea and a maid to sit for your portraits. For gold to wear at your bosom and a maid whose image you shall have painted out of your family portrait when the presence has become a taint not a gilding.

Slaughter again lays a trail of bones only this time its marrow lies in crack and manmade viruses, no act of god. Whoever said Free free at last was an optimist and don't we need optimists.

Centuries later we can look at a black and white print of a young man too too soon dead. On the dust jacket of a book. We can read his words we can feel a tear drop like that self same piece of fools gold she holds in her hand.

She does not dance this black madonna. Not framed within a viewfinder. She dances only truly in private. So often alone. She will no longer dance with you as she has done before. History may repeat but she knows the truth of the ingot she holds and she will pass it to the next eager player in the game, like a dice in a gamble for life or death. For her this is not a problem for she shall tear this dress to ribbons then burn the horsehair upon her head. And dance like another unknown sister sang, in full knowledge of her beauty. It takes not a photograph to tell us that she does not need us. It takes only a breath to know that no one could hold her if she wished to rise like Nike upon her winged heels and take off to fly with the grace of an ibis off around the world to other spaces other places beyond the predictable.

Her knowledge now is too great for even us her Elders to contain.

CALLIOPE

'I drink champagne early in the morning instead of leaving my home with an M16 and nowhere to go.'

Of course the shit about being a heroic poet, as opposed to an heroic poet, is that if you're black and female the chance of ones poetry being attributed to one in later life is slim. Especially if in ones errant youth one hung out with indifferently abled wordsmiths of moderate means and infinite egos.

You know how it is, first you think they wooed you for your beauty, or your jewels or perhaps even your ethnicity but slowly as time passes, in the interim, you realise it's your fucking talent they were after. That casual request for help with a rythmn or a rhyme soon after appears in print under some fuckers nom de plume and you're done for. For those are the gems by which the other work is later measured and as they hold your tone and your metre and you sure as hell know that no one is going to be able to prove which of this stuff you wrote and which is the word of the Master. Because of course the Master is measured by the yardstick you provided and so now you know just what it is like to live in the shadow of a shadowy past.

The stuff they write about you when your dead. I should know. I wrote some of it myself. Well, constructed the fiction that was to be my obituary. This is how it happened. There I was in Pere Lachaise taking the air with this womanfriend of mine when we happened to pass the Nadar family plot, not a tomb you note just a plot. Well you could see quite plainly where the gaps had been left for future residents. Well Felix and me got on okay. And I just know that this little necrophiliac tale would have him turning over in his ... oh do excuse me I have wandered from the narrative. Well as I

said my friend and I had been mi'larkying about amongst the tombstones and had come across this sorrowful little gap on the tombstone which we knew to be in situ awaiting the carving of the great man's name. Well anonymous was to be a blackwoman in this blackwoman's case cause sure enough doesn't history forget to record which of Felix's photos document the beauteous black muse. Now we know that she is black, we know she is alluded to as Venus, but what we decide that we don't remember is that she is not the coal black wench of Victorian fantasy but a straightforward coloured girl like many another. This is not to say that I am not happy that my daddy's skin is as dark as you can get but it galled me to think that that fucking stupid little glass plate that i) Felix managed to keep without breaking and ii) has survived all this time, is attributed Unknown Woman when any idiot would know how to put two and two together to make five.

CB and me knew how to have a good time. I provided the inspiration, he provided the cover. A mutual trade off. So how could anyone think that we wouldn't both take the trip to have our photograph taken and that once taken they would reveal the shallow notion of the theory of race. Aw shit who cares? All I care about is getting my name back on my poetry and out of the adolescent scribblings whose influence is supposed to be me.

See me, I'm a heroic poet and I don't care who knows it. And I chose my own kind and in doing so apparently consigned myself to a footnote in history. And so you know, if that is the choice I would do it again. Frankly, I couldn't give a damn.

Calliope 1989

Cibachrome print and gilt frame, Courtesy of Arts Council Collection

POLYHYMNIA

'Photography does not capture the real. So many power relations are obscured that no knowledge is gained. All that is gained is the knowledge the spectator attaches to the images, and this is fundamentally influenced by the dominant culture.'

The scarab beetle, an insect sacred in ancient Egypt, rests on the broad plane of black which is this woman's breast. We cannot see what inscription, if any, is carved on its underside. This ignorance is our responsibility. Are we brave enough to own it??

The scarab beetle, rests on the broad black plane of this woman's breast. Who is this woman?

The broad black plane of this woman's breast holds within the sacred song of our ancestors. You know this because I tell you so. You cannot tell this from looking at a photograph. Neither can you tell from looking at a photograph of me that I am a woman you should believe to be telling you the truth about the broad black plane of this woman's breast which holds within the sacred song of our ancestors.

You, dear viewer, will have to take my word for it. Afterall here is a photograph to prove it.

The sacred song of our ancestors is not a single song. No it is a melange of songs, fragments returning to wholeness and again fragmenting to create a new song out of the old song which is of course something that you will have to take my word for. Afterall there is a photograph to prove it.

The scarab beetle, an insect sacred in ancient Egypt, rests on the broad plane of black which

is this woman's breast. This I hasten to tell you is not a landscape for your old-fashioned plate camera to traverse. For if you did not only would your prints touch on a shade of black you could not even begin to remember but your eyes would be blinded.

The scarab beetle, rests on the broad black plane of this woman's breast. Who is this woman? What can you see?

The broad black plane of this woman's breast holds within the sacred song of our ancestors. You know this because I tell you so. You cannot tell this from looking at a photograph. Neither can you tell from looking at a photograph taken from my family album where the line of the scarab beetle begins and ends. Afterall what came first the scarab or the dung?

The sacred song of our ancestors is not a single song. No it is a melange of songs, fragments returning to wholeness and again fragmenting to create a new song out of the old song which is of course something that you will have to take my word for. Afterall here is a photograph to prove it.

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PHALIA

'I said to the doctor that I had permission of Dr. Leon to take some pictures (of the Zombie) and he helped me to go about it.'

The Bringer of Flowers wheels her cart around the place. Often running over toes that get in her way. She doesn't cause them much pain but they resent it none the less. She copes.

The Bringer of Flowers wheels her cart around the place. Growing flowers by her own hands. In searching for her mother's garden she found her own. She nurtures it.

The Bringer of Flowers wheels her cart around the place. Sometimes she makes garlands, often of words, more often of flowers. She'll give these gifts to whom she likes. Whether they want one or not. Sometimes they don't even know that they have one until it's perhaps taken away again by her. Why should she leave them to rot when there are so many eager folk who'd give up that which they cannot afford simply to hold in their hand a single petal which she has grown.

Her voice is as smooth as treacle and the words she spills forth are just as sticky for the unwary. You cannot know this of course by just looking at her photograph. The camera might never lie but it certainly does not hold a monopoly on truth. It makes no difference to see her in black and white or colour. She always frames herself the same.

Her ever lengthening locks, sun bleached peppered with grey, frame her moonly shaped face. Its crescents wax and wane with the

season within which she lives each moment of life. Fully.

We see nothing of her which she does not want us to see. Sometimes we feel betrayed by this, at other times relieved. Unsure that we could accept the responsibility for the truth that revelation might bring.

The Bringer of Flowers is sometimes too beautiful to behold. At times as ugly as sin. And she isn't too afraid to show it. We on the other hand long for the pretty one. We long for the pretty one to come and tell us a tale. A nice tale. Not a horrid tale, or an angry tale, or a frightening tale. No what we so often want is a simple tale — a funny tale is even better. Look how we rock from side to side. Elated.

The Bringer of Flowers wheels her cart around the place. Growing flowers by her own hand. In searching for her mother's garden she found her own. She nurtures it. In searching for her mother's garden she helped motherless children make their own gardens. Sometimes we love her for this, sometimes we hate her. More often than not we simply get on with the painful process of living. We grow flowers by our own hand. Sometimes the bringer of flowers wheels her cart around to our own yard. We fill it with wild bunches of flowers grown by our own hand. She thanks us, not over much, then leaves us. We miss her. No photograph could ever show how much.

ERATO

*'While a piece of each Black woman remembers the old ways of another place
– when we enjoyed each other in a sisterhood of work and play and power –
other pieces of us, less functional, eye one another with suspicion.'*

There was something in the photograph that reminded him of his mother. By which of course he meant reminded him of the photograph of his mother which he had seen. So perhaps it is true that art mirrors life eh eh?

Growing up in a sea of white made it difficult to see connexions. Connexions in the line of jaw or the shape of an eye, the spear like angle of a spine. It is hard to remember now what it was like to live before the time the photograph appeared. Children's memories are selective by necessity. So as a young man to be confronted with a small slip of paper attached to which was a tiny photobooth image said to have been a copy of the one on the passport of his mother it was hard to remember, to remember what it had felt like in the days gone by, and not be engulfed with the emotion of the moment in hand and the subsequent moments that were to follow.

If art does mirror life why doesn't it spontaneously combust and burst forth out of the frame. Why is it trapped in its limitations, why is trapped within a border. A white rectangular border.

There was something in the drumbeat that reminded her of her son. By which of course she meant reminded her of the glimpse of her son which she had seen. So perhaps it is true that art mirrors life eh eh?

The Black triangle is tiny and simultaneously immense. There you can be casually strolling down an English country lane and come across so many black people that you think you must

be back-a-yard. Not that the natives would want to believe it. Just like back-a-yard.

I look at a photograph of me overlaid with a photograph of my sister and there I am all over and I love it. This I imagine is everyone's experience. Until one day someone says to me make me some pictures and I do and she says you know I don't have a single photo and I say but surely, and she says no and then I realise why sometimes I am viewed with suspicion in my contentment.

Then of course I start to worry. What would I do if I didn't have them, what would I do if I suddenly lost them what would I do if they no longer existed? So I ask my friend and she says, cause she's pretty bright my friend, well you have options. Lots of people in this life don't, she's also a bit sanctimonious sometimes my friend, so it seems to me your options are, you can either mourn their loss forever, which seems a shame as you enjoyed them while you had them, try to remember what it was that was important about them and hold onto that, but not that tightly or the memory might just take flight, or you know you could always make yourself a new set. Afterall when God created woman she made her in her own likeness.

And with that sobering thought she made me take her to a bar we know. We like to drink there. We had some wine. White. Cold. It tasted good. After she left I remembered that I didn't have a photo of my friend. I didn't need one while she was there. So why should I need one when she's gone.

Erato (Portrait of Dionne Sparks) 1989

Cibachrome print and gilt frame, Courtesy of Private Collection