

## The First Act of Liberation Is to Destroy One's Cage / Michael S. Harper

For Black poets, in particular, *the first act of liberation is to destroy one's cage*; one acquires the techniques of expression, chooses one's form, has the will, makes the choice: to become an *image-maker*. The true poet writes out of *experience transformed by technique into liberation*: a transformational act, in deed. The poet's function is to force the reader/listener to change one's life, to acquire those missing parts needed to make one's survival-kit-of-escape function, to make oneself whole. Some helpful tools of technical assistance include: a sense of heroic tradition; conjure knowledge; struggle as a modal perception of living; a sense of optimism; a belief in testimony and the testamental process, for man is spiritual, an art form, to be beautified, to be educated in the manifest (seen) and the potential (unseen) aspects of his being; a rigor of improvisation that can transform one's sense of reality; the ability to focus with intent (conjure) for the magical aspects *image-making*; an insistence on revelation as an antidote to pathology, the healing song of transcendence through ritual, from a moral perspective, from a sense of cosmology, a sense of oneness; a knowledge of cages, many velvet-carpeted, some with magnificent views, but no *vision*: to look is not necessarily to see/to see is to have vision/"*straight, no chaser*" said the musician, says the image-maker.

## Free Fantasia: Tiger Flowers / Robert Hayden

(for Michael)

The sporting people  
along St. Antoine—  
that scufflers'  
paradise of ironies—  
bet salty money  
on his righteous  
hook and jab.

I was a boy then, running  
(unbeknownst to Pa)  
errands for Miss Jackie  
and Stack-o'-Diamonds' Eula Mae.  
. . . Their perfumes,  
rouged Egyptian faces.  
    Their pianolas jazzing.

O Creole babies,  
Dixie odalisques,  
speeding through cutglass  
dark to see the macho angel  
    trick you'd never  
turn, his bluesteel prowess  
    in the ring.

Hardshell believers  
amen'd the wreck  
as God A'mighty's  
will. I'd thought  
    such gaiety could not  
die. Nor could our  
    elegant avenger.

*The Virgin Forest*  
by Rousseau—  
its psychedelic flowers  
towering, its deathless  
    dark dream-figure  
death the leopard  
    claws—I choose it  
now as elegy  
    for Tiger Flowers.

## “Good Night, Willie Lee, I’ll See You in the Morning” / Alice Walker

Looking down into my father's  
dead face  
for the last time