

TERRANCE HAYES

Self-Portrait as the Mind of a Camera

—*After Charles “Teenie” Harris*

I.

Because everyone and everything we see is a self-portrait,
 We get to be the hangouts and the hotspots on the blouse
 of a woman Whose legs tilt into eternity. We get to be the woman

As her shoes make a song on the pavement as well as the whole day
 Bending down to listen, the background and skyline, the front yard
 And riverfront windows, the gloved or manicured hands, photogenic

Cures for what ails the interior. We get to be the vessels of duration
 And feasible profit and the men building a roost of coins and prospects
 Out of ingots, ignitions, slabs and sheets of metal reflecting vibrant

Broken colors. We get to be all that, Brothers and Sisters,
 When we lie back and let the agent of beauty lay hands on us.
 What if, in your previous life, you were born a black man’s camera?

Suppose you lived as something filled with a light and darkness
 That’s defined by what it touches. What if you could hold everything
 You behold in a chamber inside yourself? To be black and white

Is to possess a sense of the existential and sense the colors
 Conspiring against you, but it is also to hold the faces of people
 Who’d be anonymous without you. It is to behold a woman

From behind. I’m talking, in part, about the curve of her hairline.
 You are an instrument of visible music, Camera, an innuendo
 Of shutter and release, a focused mind in love with witness.

We look at you looking at us standing in an apple orchard
Grinning ear to ear with an eye on the non-stop future
Some afternoon as the light hung on us like jewelry.

Behold the sister waiting to have your opalescent lens
Cover her body like praise poured to preserve the loveliness
Haters have tried to erase. Behold the woman in a bathing suit

Reclining in mid air and all the young men who sigh
Amen, Good Lord, Goddamn. We live so lively in you, Camera,
That even the furniture Misses us when we're gone.

When only the satin and dark Shot glasses remain,
Camera, you help us feel a little less empty.
You make me feel a bit less blue, Camera, you do.

II.

We slide into your suit and move on down the avenue.
Because everyone and everything is a self-portrait,
We get to be the upturned salutes, the bouquet at rest,

The expressions that evaporate sadness, the punctuating
Rain, the clouded judgments and clouded air suffocating
The city, we get to be the flame in a black man's hands,

Thanks to you. Drawn to illumination and to the darkest
Basements too, we slide across the floorboards
With a leg kicked up, we slide across the troubled waters

Like dancers in a blues ballet where no one is lost.
The scars we cover in ornaments and rouge, you uncover,
The youth we lose, you make permanent. Camera,

You really have to love us to keep us from disappearing.
Bodies of solar powered soul, Postures lit enough to survive
A gaze with no heart in it. Mistranslations, myths, obfuscations.

Most of what we know of the past, we know because of you.
The cross dresser's jubilation is a self portrait, a brother's cap
Turned sideways against insults and infinite assaults.

Hold us, Camera, until we are not as black as what they called us
Before they called us what they call us now: we are blacker.
We are as elusive as a woman sliding through the smoke

Of a man's embrace. We are everyone: five boys with bongos,
A junction of tongues, an image of verbal bangabouting,
Sparks of wet "say-what" in the gladmouth. The world gets

Rearranged, People get together in its architecture,
Fringe and sequins slip from the edges of a hot body,
The angles the onlookers calculate. We are on the side

Of *Good Lord* as well as the side of *goddamn*. To be black
And white is to live covered in a sweat that becomes
All the water you need as long as you have to live.

III.

The women will still be here when they are too old
To recognize themselves, decked in hats and a colors
That could make us run out for flowers. To hold time still,

It may well be that God gave us photographs and photographers.
It's not the same as painting or motion pictures: holding
Something you can press your lips to. When an image is sucked

Into the camera it almost sounds like *sugar*, “sshhhka,” “sshhhka.”
It almost sounds like change falling into change, coins clinking
In a restless pocket. When the image is consumed

It almost sounds like the wetness of two bodies clicking
Into one another, like a soft pucker, a mechanical clucking
Issues as the eye swallows the picture. I need metaphor

To describe it. I cannot hear the black man say “Look
Into the camera.” I cannot hear the whispers or ruckus recorded
Or deconstructed in the scene, but I know there are three kinds

Of looking in every picture: the way the photographer looks,
The way the subject looks and the way it all looks to you.
I know there are three visions of time in a self-portrait:

The one who looks to the future, the one who watches
From the past and the one who views the exchange. Camera,
I cannot say how I came to love you despite the number of ways

You show me the things I will give up and the things I will have taken
From me: the bunched lovely bodied loves, the expressions
That make ice evaporate. You make us people with no words

For *destructible* or *death*, you make us our mothers and fathers,
Our durable blood, our *Kiss-My-Ass* or *Kiss-Me-Baby*,
Our never-ending ends, the lovely girls who smile in a way

That makes anyone looking at them feel lovely. I will shuck
My socks and shoes for you, Camera, I'll show my toes,
I'll shuck my clothes and pose, I'll shuck my skin until my rhythm

Is exposed. Motion blur. Shutter speed. A standing dance
With someone's "again" strung out overhead, the sisters
With thunder in their grooves, the rise and footfall

Of what's chased off, the skipped stone of what's tossed out,
The song of a dress and dolled-up hairdo, of styled and stylish
Measure, of styles of beauty and styles of being and possibility.

IV.

I believe an archive of moments can become momentous.
I believe everyone is everyone, everything is everything,
But, People, it's okay if it all looks different to you.

Not even two eyes in the same head see the same things.
I try to never confuse plain facts with plain truths. The certainty
Of our grandeur has little to do with what certain history books

Say was once our circumstance. You get to be
Rearranged and live with a notion someone is blessing you.
If you were a camera, you'd get to be covered in fingerprints,

An ion sheen, an emulsion of silver crystals and the latent imagery
Man calls memory would live in you. Negative and positive scenes
Would wait to be processed. You'd manipulate the power of death,

The artillery of blind, tyrannical beliefs. *Do not be too ready to die,*
Do not cruise if you are not bullet proof, you'd say to anyone
With a mind to outlaw you. Headshot, aperture, perspective,

A sort of automated photosynthesis, assembled resemblances,
Feelings light and darkness pass through. Form formed from a form
Light and darkness pass through. Lie back, Brothers and Sisters,

Let Beauty lay hands on you. When you are a camera, your parts are held
Together by industry and idealism, the photographer's eye dealing imagery
Like a deck of cards, the idle and idyllic and idols held lightly in a square

Of two-dimensional exactitudes, a refuge of ruined buildings
And faces no one could envision. You are a traveling museum
Meant to give the past an appearance. A viewfinder, a timer,

You have been passed down from Mo Ti in the fifth century,
The pinholes of Euclid and Aristotle's eclipse, from Nicéphore Niépce,
From Daguerre's daguerreotype and John Herschel's blueprint.

You are as stitched together as the African-Americans who migrated
To Northern cities, a chimeric patchwork of high and low places,
Of scavenging and fire, miracle and myth. You probably should not exist.

I want to look inside your insides and see all the praise and engineering,
I want to behold and be held by the spirit baptized in the light and darkness
Reflected off of everything and the light and the darkness everything emits.