

April 13, 1971

# Tuesday

## Mama Death

by Clayton Hardiman

Mama Death could be drama, poetry or meaningless abstraction. It is the drama of ritual failure. The drama of days of being alone. This may be the drama of your life, years from now. Characters:

### The Actors

The light skinned man: 52 years old.

The bigot: Physically weak, not quite effeminate. 40 years old.

Alphonso: Probably considered ugly, scars running over the left side of his face down onto his neck. 34 years old.

Two Others: In their mid forties.

### The Audience

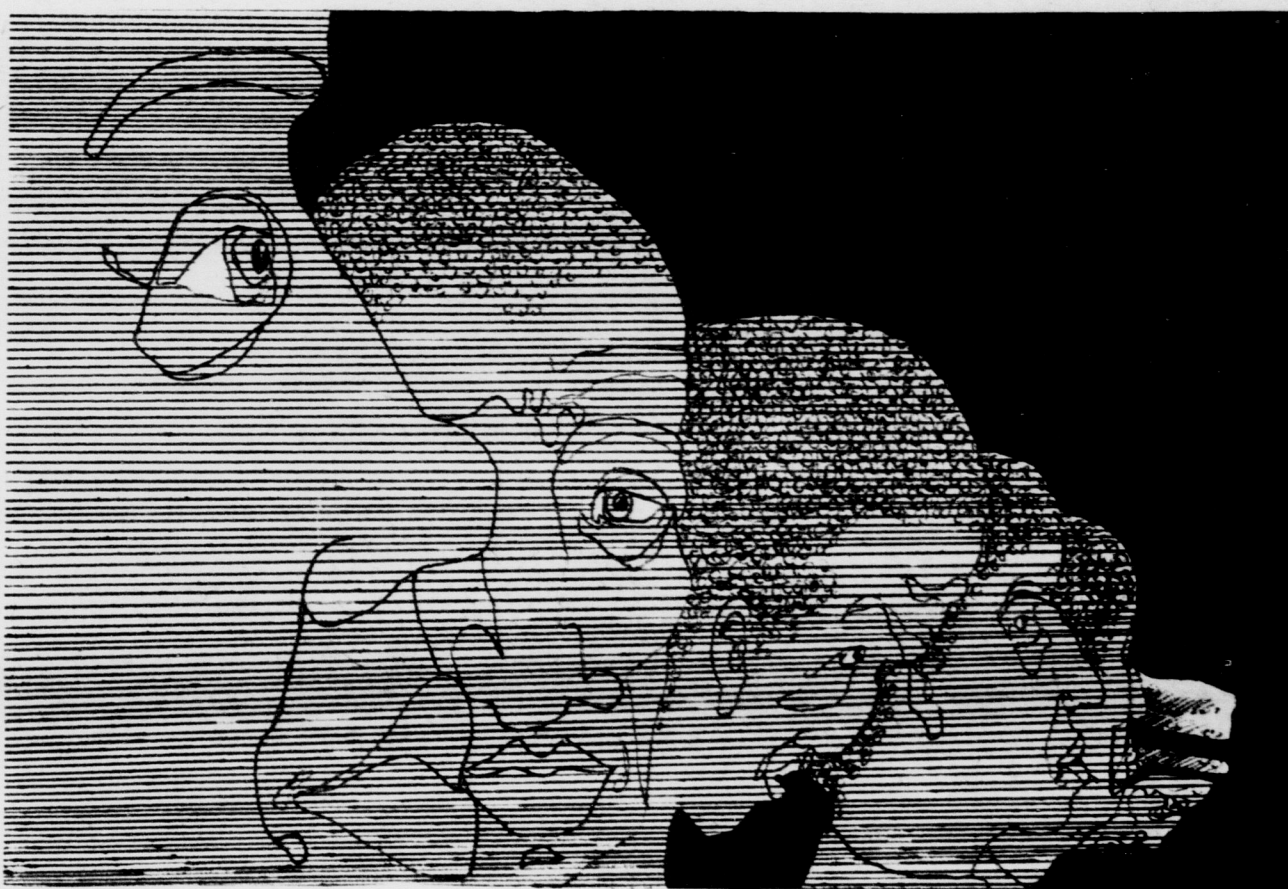
The Reverend: Minister in the three button suit tradition. 63 years old.

Black mama love. One of them said that and laughed. Old black love. All the meat you can handle. And he laughed again. One of the others crossed his fragile legs and shielded his eyes from the sun. Go get her hero, he said in a weary tone. Eat her up. And he rolled his eyes for the rest of them to laugh at what he saw. Old black woman. Not really old. Tired. Ashamed of themselves, crossing streets with their purchases hugged frantically to their heavy swaying breasts. Sidewalks creaked beneath the weight of those full behinds. Some turned indignantly to stare from under thin streaked hair.

The cold grew sharper with the wind, and the old black men huddled together on their bench like lewd children. Some faggots were passing. Poked each other with their hard bony elbows and knowingly smiled their wet greasy smiles at the old men on the bench because their knees and shoulders were touching and their heads were lowered and shoved tight out of the cold. Some of the men noticed those skinny moralists who had stopped and were shyly watching them. Empty men, people probably thought looking at them on that bench, old empty men too afraid to walk anywhere except through shadows, but it couldn't matter. To have lived as long as they had, they had to know who they were. Athletes and bus drivers who pretended they were rich. A professor, a respected wino. A lousy actor. They were all actors. They had all hustled at one time or another.

The faggots turned and went on across the street through the traffic. The old niggers on the bench waited till the cold seemed to subside, then fell away from each other. Sniffed and stretched the taut skin of their faces into weird smiles. Smiles that were directed at the cars that roared around their traffic island. At all of cold downtown. At the kids and cops and cobblestones. Whoever got in the way, it seemed to the old man who watched from where he stood, across the grass with one foot on the curb and his hands folded in his coat. Grey fedora tipped dangerously toward his left eye.

He brought his other foot up and stood on the edge of the island with his chest heaving. Possibly from the effort of pretense. Of that simple motion. He said God to himself as if it would make some kind of strength inside. Then he simply walked across and sat down on one end of the bench. He was going to say, do you mind if I sit here, but he was afraid of what answers they might have given.



One of the actors on the other end of the bench gave him a side glance, then turned quickly away as if afraid to be checking out something his mind had stated specifically was none of his business. Someone else said loudly, this bench is getting pretty damn crowded, and none of you niggers have ever smelled too cool anyway.

Can I sit here? The old man perched on the end of the bench said. He stood up and put his hands in his pockets. Can I sit here?

Some of them stared into the frozen grass. The flesh on their knobby hands already folded and dead. Their faces stonier than sullen. He wanted answers. He wanted to walk away, but now he had that expectant feeling that all the men on this bench had some special brand of bitterness that would make them stand up and curse at everything. They were going to shout all kinds of meaningless shit at all the hopeless white faces around their little traffic island, races that didn't even know they were there. He felt sick. He could have shouted the same thing from a curb or a stepladder on a corner. He could have written it on the walls of buildings from the alleys in back. He could have just sat on cold stone benches all his life shouting it aside and glancing idly at whatever flesh ambled by. Black mama love. He could have done that. But finally he had to be honest with himself. He couldn't have done any of it. He didn't even feel it. There was nothing he could have shouted or written or ignored. It made him sick. He waited for them to hang their hysteria in words, but they just kept looking into the grass, and one of them finally said, personally, I don't give a goddamn.

Someone else said, unless you're a eunuch. I can't stand eunuchs. I'm a bigot, maybe.

The light skinned man who had spoken first wiped his freckled nose with his fingers and looked up. Why shouldn't we want you here. Is something wrong with you, I mean, some contagious shit? I don't even know your name myself. I'm a minister.

Of what, someone was going to say. He didn't want to look at any of them. He knew what they were going to do. But no one said anything, except the bigot who lifted his filthy hands and said, a reverend. Damn I want his man on my side. Sit down over here.

No one said anything after he sat down. They made a silence almost long enough to be uncomfortable. He was wondering what they were thinking, what they saw when they glanced furtively at him. It was far too futile to worry about. Far too late. Someone asked him if he had a place to stay, and he almost didn't answer. Then he told them he did. He had to picture it before he could answer, as if he simply didn't trust his deepest response. He smiled at himself. There was more humor in it than he could afford to appreciate.

What he really had was only a room, almost a closet with a bed and a lamp in it. Most days he spent sprawled across his bed dozing or sitting on the floor watching the window. It overlooked a gas station and some other buildings. Beyond all that, a street, dark and silent in nights. He spent his nights looking out and waiting for something significant to happen. For night ladies to motion

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# poetry/roy bryan



If personal experience is the resource for poetry, then it is essential for the poet to be free from the restraints which stifle experience. Roy Bryan is free. He is free from the confines of the academy, free to follow his senses, free to write at will. Since graduating from MSU with a B.A. degree in English, Roy has spent time on a master of fine arts program at Bowling Green State University, along Oregon beaches, as a guide in the Minnesota north country and, while in East Lansing, working at odd jobs such as a cook and a dishwasher. During this time, Roy's poetry writing has developed into a habit. For Roy it is a habit that cannot be broken, a habit that he has learned to live with, a habit that he has decided to try and do well.

Roy's poetry is lodged in a sensitivity of the natural environment and its relationship to the human condition. His poems illustrate the thrust of existence as rehearsed in the everyday acts of nature. Roy combines nature imagery with personal sentiment to illuminate the dark path toward self-knowledge. The language he uses associated with nature provides not only the tones and textures of that which it describes, but also the tones and textures of human life — the life Roy Bryan has chosen to depict in these poems.

— Robert Sickels

## SEA SALT

### I

Hearing gulls brew, we hold  
For a whole instant  
Ocean cupped in our hands;  
And watch, in a rusted pot,  
Ocean boil to salt. We have drifted,  
Like the wood we burn, into strange stances.  
We can give, We can take.  
But we watch: and our silence,  
Watching us, gives and takes in our name.

### II

Gulls love on opening currents:  
And tending fire, we spend much time  
Hunting fuel, listening to their strange  
pronouncement.  
Can we discover? Can we discover  
We are thick in sea water?  
And creating, do we know,  
With the depth of any ocean,  
How to wrap a body around ourselves?

### III

Overhead, gulls continue boiling  
Around smoke from our driftwood.  
Salt forms grainy, dark white.  
Minor alchemists, we know  
On empty beaches  
The toil; and we know  
If I taste your salt  
I taste oceans closing around.

## OPEN FIELD

### I

The mist, relaxed, is almost silent.  
A ground fog,  
Having been trapped in my low spots,  
Crawls the whole field.

Walking, scraping wet seeds,  
I have lost, awaiting shelter,  
The calm of landscape.

### II

With shadow, ominous of open storm,  
My bones crack thunder,  
Hollow depth.  
I am holding,  
Turbulent over my own words,  
Holding the lightning within me.

It is morning  
And getting darker.  
If you have felt storm  
Coldly move in on stationary storm,  
You know, cursing, the excitement,  
Downpour,  
Shattering of inner sound.

### III

The weeds, bent from rain,  
Snapping back by wind,  
Are growing.

Out here, if lightning flashes,  
You can anticipate,  
Counting for distance.

And as clouds spill out  
I take into my hands mud,  
Seed,  
Plant my own field.

And as I kneel,  
The noise drenched, sputtering,  
I have always been more articulate  
To myself  
Than I can expose.

There are few times, now,  
My eyes losing glow,  
You will be struck, the lightning out  
Before I have heard the thunder.

### IV

Streaked with sweat,  
Calmly feeling my wind fall,  
I watch the rain, steadied,  
Cleanse at least my flesh.  
Even my bones are sore.

Barely audible, the thunder whispers:  
And I am silent.  
It is still too dark  
For birds to sing.



## SNOW GEESE

The weeds, bitter, close around  
In cadence with our walk.  
We are, at false dawn, a slow procession  
Circling a winter lake.

And ending a fitful sleep,  
The snow geese, shaken from wet grass,  
Openly sound our disturbance.

Their song, fleeing,  
Migrating into my memory,  
Has been sung, since my own awakening,  
Too deep in my throat  
For you to hear.

And having arisen, the whole flock  
Circles. We watch, straining.  
Strong shadows disappear,

The wind, a migration of heavy wings,  
Rains against my chest.  
And standing, the marsh lake  
Lapping our boots,  
We wait.  
We should learn, soon, to understand  
Their sense of direction.  
Our own escape, weighed by the marrow  
Held deep in hollow bones,  
Slows with each step felt south.

### II

There must be a full moon  
Behind this, We are, alone, unable to stop  
The wind blowing through us.

And the clouds,  
Content to camouflage our walk, wait  
As we continue hunting  
A point of return.

It feels colder than snow.

Occasionally, burning with color,  
A leaf feels my cheek.

And feeling uneasy,  
Despite the darkness,  
I stop, trying to pull you with me.

The trees, branches still composed,  
Listen, patiently, as I quote  
In what I think are eloquent silences.

### III

And as rain turns to snow,  
Morning finally arriving,  
We breathe the flakes in, the cold  
Knowingly within us.  
We must relearn, like young children,  
Our own warmth.

### IV

Last night, wary of sleep, tired,  
Strange dreams  
Wet in the steady rain  
Formed with our continuous walking.

The heavy stubble, underbrush,  
The colder parts of our imagination,  
Scraped unseen against us.

And circling the lake,  
We had begun, finally,  
Our own devious migration.

It was cold enough.

Above, having passed, the snow geese  
Whirled in the evening's darkness,  
Decended, covering us,  
The lake, the field's remaining grain  
With a feathery snow.



photography by Roger Hill

## HOLDING A SHELL

A single tern opens, folding its wings  
Rising deeper, deeper in my mind.  
Salt blows against my skin.

Beaches we were waved up to  
Thrown down on  
Are littered with us, returning,  
Despite distances crawled,  
To hunt soundings of origin:  
Pieces of shell are embedded in the sand.

Twisted in my ear-bones  
The tern, whirling, rises on those oceans  
Collapsing in my flesh.  
Taking a conch shell, its soundtrack  
Replaying the ocean's windiest cry,  
I can feel my fragile quality  
Containing a deafening roar.



# Mama Death

(continued from front)

a car to the curb and make their move. For winos to arouse his contempt with their ridiculous fights breaking the silence apart. For people to glare up at his dark window, not even knowing he was there.

He reached inside his coat. Offered the others a cigarette and lit his own when the wind subsided a little. He wasn't enjoying this. He almost wanted the bench to himself, but he wasn't going back to that closet above the gas station. He wasn't at all sure what he was going to do before he died. He wanted to lie against a woman and be quiet and listen to the noise of her snores. Then perhaps he could sleep. It was almost that same temptation he always warned other men against.

He was a minister. He kept that lodged in his consciousness. He could preach. He could advise people. He could pass the hat. He laughed as soon as that came into his head. He couldn't help thinking that every time he did it, he was making a new contribution to his own particular culture. His own sensibility. His own income, finally. He was a minister, but for the first time, sitting there with these old coons, he was glad he didn't have a flock and never had to worry about his image. He wondered if any of them were drunk now. He smelled nothing, but he knew they were winos.

He was staring at the street. When his eyes focused, he was watching a black woman walking past the store windows. He swallowed hard. It didn't change anything. Everything tasted of huge black women with loose breasts naked in bed. He was a minister, and he couldn't forget it, but his had nothing to do with divine love for the people. If it did he could have drawn his eyes away from this woman and fastened them on the feeble minded Americans who rushed up and down the street in their huge cars, afraid to take their eyes off the road and look at anybody.

It's love. Don't tell me it isn't. That flesh is love. Black mama. Love that flesh, someone at the other end was saying. The voice was soft and boring. The reverend sucked on his cigarette trying not to be interested.

Now just cut that shit out, Alphonso. Just drop that. We got the clergy with us. The bigot folded his hands on his skinny knee. Shivered when the wind cut through. His head held stiffly back. The reverend watched him closely and smiled. Wanted to reach across and touch him. Anticipate whatever humor he would come up with and laugh at it.

The light skinned man was watching all of them. The reverend felt his eyes on him and crossed his legs. He wanted to erase what he was thinking from his mind. That none of these people even knew his name. He hated thinking about it. Even the image itself was sentimental. he knew this man wasn't thinking about him in those terms. No man thought of another alone and weeping against a window. Mother love, he said then but not very loud and only to himself.

You is some perverted niggers, the light skinned man said and shook his wooly head laughing. All you lechers. That chick is young enough to be your daughter. If I ever caught you sniffing around my little girls, you wouldn't ever be able to run far enough.

The reverend forced a smile on his face. You got children, do you?

Yeah. I got kids. Six, maybe, although to my mind they could be anybody's. I mean, I don't keep my woman locked in a cellar or chained to my bed. Shit, Alphonso's always got his butt around my house whenever I come home, and he's a young man, although he don't look it. But I think they're mine. How about you?

I don't know, the reverend said and fell silent. It was a lie: he knew. A harsh wish, an accusation. He did know. None of the women he had tried to help, none of the women he had paid would have been so careless.

Yeah, rev, I know what you mean, rev, it's a goddamn hassle worrying about all those bastards you might have left behind, ain't it, rev, Alphonso said, a hostile grin holding his scarred face. Huh, rev.

Shut up, Alphonso. It was the biggot talking, but the same laughter was in his voice. I mean, this man is a reverend. You can't talk to him the way you talk to us.

I'm a minister, the reverend said. I don't know

anything about that. I'm a minister of God.

Alphonso laughed now. Looked at the others and chuckled evilly. You can sit there and say that. You say that like you think it's some protection against sin. Whatever that finally come to mean.

The reverend felt any semblance of comfort he had ebbing away. He felt like a child about to be scarred. He turned deliberately away. Looked out into the street as if his salvation was there hidden somewhere in the thick exhaust of traffic.

Alphonso saw it, and his voice grew harsher. Sin. Shit, he said viciously. It don't even protect you against hurt or being hungry. Does it, rev? It doesn't even keep you from being cold. I mean titles make poor blankets, don't they rev? Yeah I saw you when they carried you out of that place on a stretcher. I know you. I saw you when you were weakest, and that hurts, don't it rev? I saw you when you had damned near froze to death. Your body still steaming and black like you had been burned. Almost like cold hell. Yeah, I know you, rev.

The reverend felt himself turn inside, a quick violent movement. He didn't want any more answers. Without even turning around, he said, I know you too. What more do you really know about me than I know about you? I seen you every night. Everywhere. You can't imagine, he said and stopped, choking on the words. Then he went on. You can't imagine what I seen and what that makes me. I seen you every night under my window. I seen you getting drunk, pissing yourself behind trees. Raping whores and fighting with dirty wine bottles. I seen you by the hundreds. All over the city on every street. Wino.

Shut up, old man, Alphonso said. On his feet now and huge. Shut up and leave me alone.

Goddamn, Alphonso, the bigot said. Siddown before you trip over yourself.

Something exploded. It was in the reverend's mind somewhere. The idea that he wanted to rush at that scarred face, hopeless flesh, and hammer it into something useful. Something not so similar to what it was he was so afraid of now. Cold. Death. Walls of icy marble. His closet, his room, his body sprawled across his bed and his breath just visible out of his nostrils. Steam still rising through his clothes when they found

him crumpled in his room. On the edge. Raging. Way out of control. He was on the edge of his stone bench, raging. Shouting words that were almost violent, almost nonsense. Cold. You stand there around my grave interested in the dead flesh you never even knew because it shivered and stiffened finally in a tiny room. Because I almost froze. Because I almost died a spectacular death. You niggers, I live cold, you useless niggers, I die stupid and quiet deaths every day. Where are you then, God damn you, where are you then?

He rushed at them. Alphonso waited, that evil grin flashing on just before the old man hit him full in the face, knocking his back on the bench. He hit him again, near the throat. Alphonso slid off the bench onto the ground, the reverend on top of him and still pummeling him in the face and chest. The light skinned man leaned forward and smiled a little. The others watched them amazed. Alphonso managed to clear his head and catch the reverend in an embrace, pinning his arms to his sides. He rolled over and sat astride the reverend's body and slapped his face until the bigot calmly told him, stop, you're killing him.

No I'm not, Alphonso said and slapped him again.

Get off him, Alphonso. Look at him, he's not breathing, the light skinned man said. He was on his feet and frantic.

The reverend felt the weight of his chest shift and Alphonso's wet breath on his face. Then the weight was gone altogether. The reverend felt his sides slipping away. His face swelling. He felt the sound of Alphonso's voice.

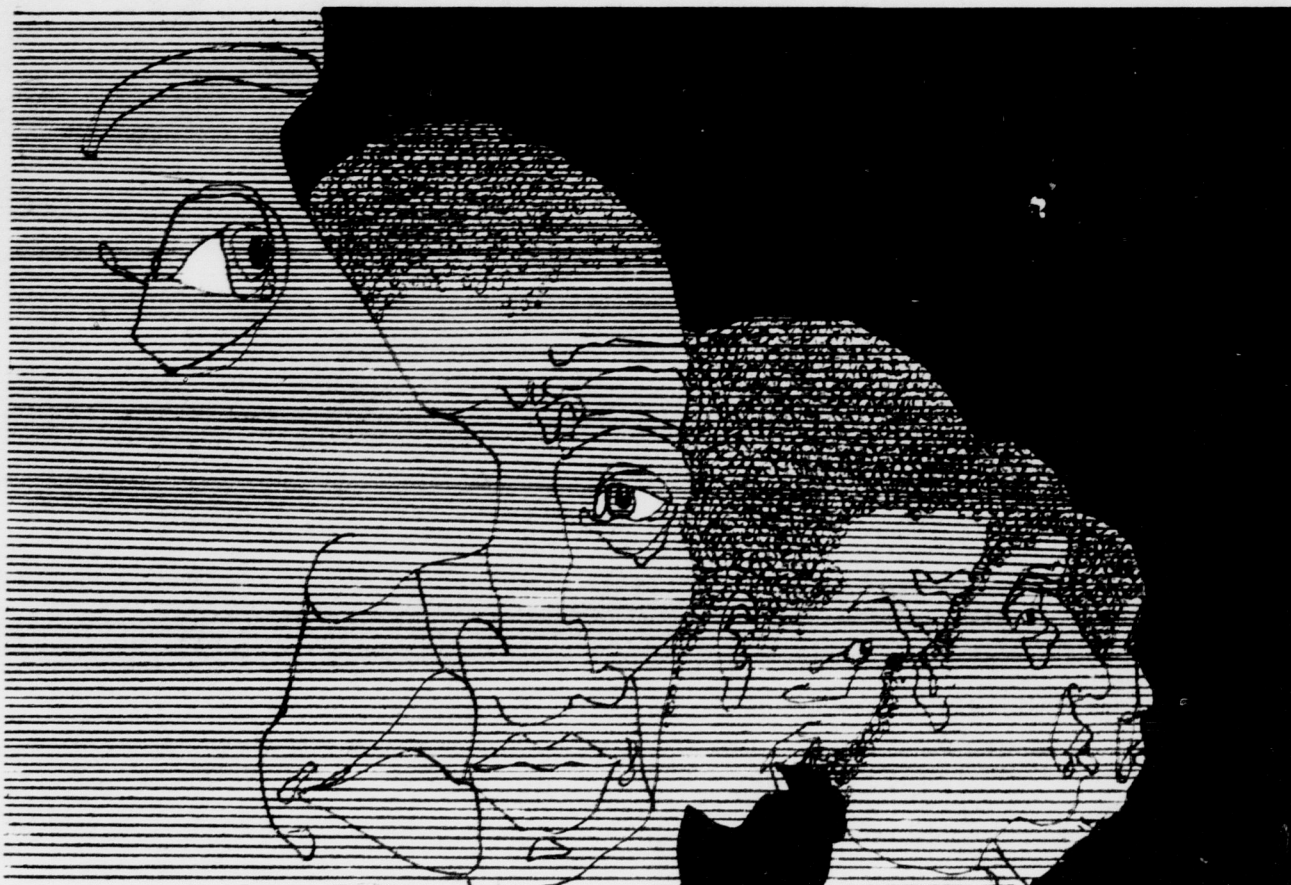
Shit, he better not be dead. Hey, rev, wake up. Hey, I didn't even hit him that hard.

He wasn't going to move. He wasn't going back to that room, that street, that gas station. To sit and live and die. He was going to lie here, a final gesture of public expression, until he froze or starved or was killed. It would be the sweetest form of suicide. People would walk past, railing and wagging their heads.

Hey, rev, get up from there. Alphonso laughed nervously. I mean it. You don't stand up, I'll spit on your body. If you're dead, I'll spit on you.

The reverend rolled onto his stomach to protect his face. Then he was still. Thinking probably the same kind of thoughts you will think. The cold earth's edge ravaging his face.

BLACK



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