ON THE DEATH OF ED BLACKWELL, OCTOBER, 1992

Master of silences, his drums

cajoled and commanded, muttered and sang.

First came the bass, steady as pulse,

august as antelopes against the horizon,

laying down heartbeat.

Next he would summon rhythm against rhythm

phrase became poem, poem became saga.

I could have sat and listened whole hours

to his colloquies of tom-tom and cowbell,

triplet soundings of shimmering cymbal,

the echoing BAOWW! BAOWW! of the gong,

the dry, insistent message of sticks,

and crisp telegraphies of snare.

Forget drums as you know them, murdering reflection;

the smoke-glassed roadster beside you in rush hour

throbbing into your solar plexus,

or the bone-shaking boom in the strobe-lighted disco.

Think of sound as a chisel; its marble, silence.

Think New Orleans, city of his birth,

funeral marches with stately tubas,

sassy trumpets, mellow trombones

marching-band drums' rat-tat-tat against death,

sun flashing up from all that b

For twenty years, three times a week, six hours each time,

sassy joy

he watched his lifeblood pulse through loops

and circlets of plastic. I'd think of that,

watching him calm behind his shades,

mouth pursed like the small, friendly snake's I caught at age seven.

He didn't move much; a true old master

behind his drumkit in cap and dashiki.

What blew out his kidneys

who can say? but usually the rescue's torture

makes quick work of body and spirit.

He triumphed: he outlived his term,

but I still begrudge death this particular prize.

I'd like to think he's at peace, sitting

with Pappa Joe, Philly Joe, Catlett and Tatum,

the Bird, Monk, Coltrane, Miles,

talking of days when the music was rising

and we still thought freedom would come at last.

--Ellen Cantarow

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