

If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet

by Linton Kwesi Johnson

if I woz a tap-natch poet
like Chris Okigbo
Derek Walcott
ar T.S.Eliot

ah woodah write a poem
soh dam deep
dat it bittah-sweet
like a precious
memory
whe mek yu weep
whe mek yu feel incomplete

like wen yu lovah leave
an dow defeat yu kanseed
still yu beg an yu plead
till yu win a repreve
an yu ready fi rack steady
but di muzik done aready

still
inna di meantime
wid mi riddim
wid mi rime
wid mi ruff base line
wid mi own sense a time

goon poet haffi step in line
caw Buthelezi mite a gat couple touzan
but Mandela fi im
touzans a touzans a touzans a touzans

if I woz a tap-natch poet
like Kamau Brathwaite
Martin Carter
Jayne Cortez ar Amiri Baraka

ah woodah write a poem
soh rude
an rootsy
an subversive
dat it mek di goon poet
tun white wid envy

like a candhumble/ voodoo/ kumina chant
a ole time calypso ar a slave song
dat get ban
but fram granny
rite dung to gran pickney
each an evry wan
can recite dat-dey wan

still
inna di meantime
wid mi riddim
wid mi rime
wid mi ruff base line
wid mi own sense a time

goon poet haffi step in line
caw Buthelezi mite a gat couple touzan
but Mandela fi im
touzans a touzans a touzans a touzans

if I woz a tap-natch poet
like Tchikaya U'tamsi
Nicholas Guillen
ar Lorna Goodison

an woodah write a poem
soh beautiful dat it simple
like a plain girl
wid good brains
an nice ways
wid a sexy dispozishan
an plenty compahshan
wid a sweet smile
an a suttle style

still
mi naw goh bow an scrape
an gwan like a ape
peddlin noh puerile parchment af ethnicity
wid ongle a vaig fleetin hint af hawtenticity
like a black Lance Percival in reverse
ar even worse
a babblin bafoon whe looze im tongue

no sah
nat atall
mi gat mi riddim
mi gat mi rime
mi gat mi ruff base line
mi gat mi own sense a time

goon poet bettah step in line
caw Buthelezi mite a gat couple touzan
but Mandela fi im
touzans a touzans a touzans a touzans

If I Was a Top-Notch Poet

by Linton Kwesi Johnson

If I was a top-notch poet
Like Chris Okigbo,
Derek Walcott
Or T.S.Eliot

I would write a poem
So damn deep
That it's bittersweet;
Like a precious
Memory
That makes you weep,
That makes you feel incomplete;

Like when your lover leaves,
And though defeat you concede
Still you beg and you plead
'Til you win a reprieve
And you're ready for rock-steady,
But the music's done already.

Still,
In the meantime,
With my rhythm,
With my rhyme,
With my rough base line,
With my own sense of time.

Goon poet has to step in line.
'Cause Buthelezi might've got a couple thousand,
But Mandela, for him
Thousands and thousands and thousands and
thousands.

If I was a top-notch poet
Like Kamau Brathwaite,
Martin Carter,
Jayne Cortez or Amiri Baraka

I would write a poem
So rude
And rootsy
And subversive
That it would make the goon poet
Turn white with envy.

Like a condumble/ voodoo/ kumina chant,
An old-time calypso or a slave song
That gets banned,
But from granny
Right down to gran-pickney
Each and every one
Can recite – that's the one!

Still,
In the meantime,
With my rhythm,
With my rhyme,
With my rough base line,
With my own sense of time.

Goon poet has to step in line.
'Cause Buthelezi might've got a couple thousand,
But Mandela, for him
Thousands and thousands and thousands and
thousands.

If I was a top-notch poet
Like T'chikaya U'tamsi,
Nicholas Guillen
Or Lorna Goodison

I would write a poem
So beautiful that it's simple;
Like a plain girl
With good brains
And nice ways,
With a sexy disposition
And plenty compassion,
With a sweet smile
And a subtle style.

Still,
I'm not going to bow and scrape
And go on like an ape,
Peddling no puerile parchment of ethnicity
With only a vague fleeting hint of authenticity,
Like a black Lance Percival in reverse,
Or even worse:
A babblin' buffoon whose lost his tongue.

No, Sir!
Not at all!
I've got my rhythm;
I've got my rhyme;
I've got my rough base line;
I've got my own sense of time!

Goon poet better step in line!
'Cause Buthelezi might've got a couple thousand,
But Mandela, for him
Thousands and thousands and thousands and
thousands.