



Henry Dumas: Truths, Poetry, and Memory

Patricia Schultheis

Always begin with indisputable facts. Compared to what is understood, but never spoken, bare-bone facts are safest. Only when they are apprehended fully, then and only then, proceed to the unspoken truths.

Fact number one: On the morning of May 23, 1968, a New York City Transit policeman shot and killed an African-American poet named Henry Dumas in the 125th Street and Lenox Avenue subway station of New York City. Fact number two: Thirty-two years later, a newsletter published a poem by a Baltimore librarian titled "Open Letter to Henry Dumas." Fact number three: A grandmother read the poem and found it so powerful she had to discover more of this Henry Dumas. Beyond these bare-bone facts lie conjecture and chimera, the very stuff of simple but unspoken truths. And of poetry and memory.

Unspoken Truths

If a poet's words confer a type of immortality, then Henry Dumas is twice alive: First, in the librarian's paean to him; second, in his own collected poems. Today, so many years after his death, there is something of a cult about this fellow Dumas. He can drive a grandmother from her comfy couch to seek out a librarian with tattoos on her arms and poems in her head.

Rachel Kubie says she realized Dumas's poetry had a unique quality when she noticed his books were disappearing from the library's shelves; patrons were simply keeping them, maybe hoarding them. Having discovered his power she embraced it, and one poet to another, crafted her own response: "I read your news," she writes in her poem. "The ink came off on my hands—" That is the nature of Dumas's poetry; it imprints our souls and inspires others to add new lengths to poetry's skein.

In a sense, Henry Dumas is a 1960s iconic figure, so full of promise was his beginning on the American journey, so tragic was his end. Had he been born white, his American dream undoubtedly would have been realized. Even his birthplace speaks to our

hardscrabble heart: Sweet Home, Arkansas—it summons images of all things industrious and decent about America. Of mowed lawns and porch swings. Of Fourth of Julys and potluck suppers.

But America's bucolic bosom is only one aspect of her geography. Before he reached manhood, Henry Dumas would also know her supercharged capital of strut and stress, New York City. When he was ten his family moved there, and Henry's journey toward the American dream continued. He graduated from high school, attended City College, and, like a dutiful son of a grateful nation, joined the Air Force. He married, had a son whom he named David, enrolled in Rutgers University, and had a second son whom he

named Michael. In the midsixties he even worked for that bastion of American enterprise, IBM.

But the more assiduously he pursued the American dream, the more he knew he was living the American nightmare. For Henry Dumas, the dream had been preordained a horror on that Sweet Home summer morning he was borman American black boy. .

Poetry became Dumas's vehicle for expressing both hiS frustration and his authentic African-American male self. While he wrote novels, plays, and articles, it was in poetry that his creativity found its fullest expression.

Rather than whine with the complaint of an individual, his poems cry with the voice of a communal spirit ruptured from its roots. They are not so much about the experience of dispossession as they express that experience through their structure and rhythms—much as the lowered timbre of a grieving individual's voice expresses loss even as his hand reaches for tea cups and condolences. It is this sound, as much as Dumas's words, that bespeaks the pain endemic to the AfricanAmerican experience.

Dumas's poems interweave three distinct rhythmic and imagistic strains: the South's fertile soil and violent mores; the North's kinetic pace and wary alertness; and, Africa's mythic and natural processes. The first two give Dumas's poetry its restraint and precision, but the African strain produces its unique sound. It communicates a sense of unity within the cosmos, the unity of nature with the individual, of the individual with his community, of the community with the planet. Consider these lines from "Emoyeni, Place of the Winds":

Look, emoyeni passing rising
By the crumbling rock and the fingerreeds
I put my ear to the mouth of an old man
Emoyeni passing passing, is what he told me

Here is the poet's belief that he is a single link in a vast, rich continuum. The wind, emoyeni, is not an element of indifferent nature, but an integral part of everything it touches. However briefly it touches a man, it must flow around him, and so be changed itself. Eagles in flight, the moon in its phases, in Dumas's poems, all are passing. And as their shadows flutter over him, the earth-bound individual shares in their soaring, for even shadows can lift us if we are alive to their touch.

Dumas's embrace of African sensibilities coincided with a heightened appreciation for Africa throughout the black community in the 1960s and with a spectacular flowering of creativity in many arts. Catalyzed by the philosophical framework of Malcolm X, the Black Arts Movement explored radical themes and experimented with new, exciting artistic forms. Eschewing existing structures as too constraining, black artists adapted old constructs to meet new needs and created original ones to express a burgeoning celebration of African origins.

By the late 1960s, no assumption nor institution was exempt from scrutiny and reevaluation. In response to the demands for more opportunities for students abandoned on the shores of the American mainstream, Southern Illinois University established an experimental program where, in 1967, Dumas accepted a position as a counselor and teacher. There he met Eugene Redmond, who would later be the executor of his estate.

"We bonded quickly and deeply," says Redmond. "There was a lot of passion and not much middle ground." The tensions in America's body politic had been mounting throughout the decade and were reaching critical mass. The only constant was change; your truest soul mate, whomever you trusted at the moment. Redmond says his political, philosophical, and creative alignment with Dumas was profound. It was, he says, as deep as the steadfast loyalty he felt to his fellow Marines when he was in the military. "It superseded

everything else. We were war ready," says Redmond. And in 1968, war it most certainly was.

When a nation cannibalizes itself, as America did that year, individuals can get lost in the numbers, their deaths overshadowed by the shades of falling heroes. The smoke from the cataclysms following the assassination of Martin Luther King still hung in the air in the early hours of May 23, 1968, when Henry Dumas entered the Lenox Avenue subway station.

What happened next is unclear. Some reports say Dumas jumped a turnstile, others that he got into an altercation with a Hispanic couple, another that he mixed it up a little too much with some subway musicians. It is better to stick with the facts. This much is known. Fact number one: Henry Dumas never left that subway station alive. Fact number two: he is buried in Long Island National Cemetery in Farmingdale, Long Island, along with his brother veterans. Fact number three: he left behind a wife named Loretta and two little boys named David and Michael—remember that.

Poetry

And, of course, he left his poems; they live in slim out-of-print volumes that disappear from library shelves—readers, hearing echoes of their own inner voices, taking them as their own. And the poems live, too, in the heart of a librarian who reads in their disappearance the truth of their news. And, who, reading it/ seeks-to-proclaim it in a poem of her own. And in so doing, raises the questions in the mind of a grandmother: What is the power of poetry that it can link one to another?—that it can give form to what is understood but never spoken?

Rachel Kubie opens her paean to Dumas with this statement: "I was born in 1968." There is a resonance here that anyone alive then will recognize. If birth is a radical bursting forth into a harsher reality, then

a new America was born in 1968—Kubie calls it "a foreign country/children come from." Gone forever, would be the vestigial optimism and innocence of the post-war era. Gone, too, the presumption of moral superiority. The year beginning with the Tet Offensive in Vietnam and ending with the election of Richard Nixon, saw an America spilling a continent's worth of blood and making a pyre of her children's bones. If only rifle sights had been mirrors, we would have seen the real enemy.

Kubie intends the figurative import of her poem's opening line. But she means it literally, too. She really was born in 1968. In St. Louis, no less. Right across the same river Dumas wrote about in his poem, "Son of Msippi." And across from East Louis where he worked in Southern Illinois University. Her poet's soul quickens to these coincidences, sensing some strange convergence of Dumas and herself across the decades. If you mention it, she smiles a little and says, "I know. I know." And shakes her head ever so slightly at the wonderment of it all, that she and Henry were a generation apart and still so close.

Books and circumstances brought them together. Kubie works in the humanities department of Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Free Library, a place so quiet you can hear the patina accreting on the oaken shelves. "It's the perfect place for a poet," she says. "You're around books all day. "

When the library invited Eugene Redmond to speak about Dumas, Kubie prepared by reading his poems. "They created a response in me, she says. She cites Dumas's poem titled "My Little Boy" as an explanation. It concludes with the line, "I like his accent." With that intimate detail, Kubie says, Dumas expressed the tectonic shifts in America generated by the civil rights movement. And she's right. After 1968 all America spoke

with a different accent, whether from grief, or rage, or the awareness that with nothing left to lose, nothing more could be denied.

I ask Kubie how a white girl a generation removed from the civil rights movement, came to her profound appreciation and empathy for the black experience in America. "I don't know... I don't know," she murmurs and shakes her head. "It's just something I have... I don't know. It's just something I always understood." There is a ruefulness here for what she knows, but cannot speak except in poems. But no bafflement. She has been given a gift, and she is wise enough to appreciate it, and to husband it well.

She is a young woman of amazing stillness, this Rachel Kubie. Everything about her is symmetrical: her dark hair knotted precisely in the back of her head; her heavy brows; the rich brown pools of her eyes. Even her teeth marks when she bites into an egg salad sandwich. She refreshes like a mountain lake on a summer afternoon.

"People tell me I am mellow," she says. She will smile at that. But not laugh—no gurgling eruptions from this young woman. Even her vocabulary—"mellow"—has an atavistic ring, as if she were born to speak the language of a different generation, not the one for whom irony substitutes for substance and inflection for vocabulary. It's hard to imagine "post" and "modern" ever conjoined on Kubie's tongue.

But she is no flower-child wannabe. Her three bold tattoos mark her as child of her generation. That we're having lunch in a 1950s style diner serving cheeseburgers and lamb vindaloo does not strike her as quirky or odd. If her biological clock is ticking, she doesn't hear it. Like most women of her generation, she determines her own path, walks it at her own pace.

Like all gifted poets Kubie can tell us an eon in a single star. Her curiosity about the 1960s fastens on the sort of detail a poet knows expresses more than it shows. Did the women freedom marchers, she wants to know, really iron their blouses before they took to the streets.

"I look at the pictures of them," she says. " Their clothes are so crisp. No one of my generation would even think of doing something like that. Did they really iron them?" I try to tell her that our style mavens were Marge Cleever and Janis Joplin. Who knew the proper attire to wear to a foreign country?

She considers this and ducks her head to her milkshake—sybaritic pleasures in small measure are always sweetest—and then reveals how much she is humbled by the sacrifices and achievements of all of America's Henry Dumases. And how much she mourns the squandering of their legacy.

"Sometimes," she says, "I think my generation has a cynicism it really hasn't earned. It's as if they really don't know what they should be cynical about." She looks at the children of these times and sees disenchantment without protest; disillusionment without outcry.