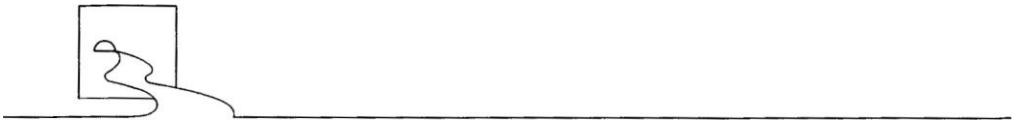

Henry Dumas: Truths, Poetry, and Memory

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 hard-scrabble 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.

Knowing better than to expect revolution from those with nothing left to want, she wonders where is the roar from those with nothing left to lose? Her poem ends with these lines:

> & I ran down to the river with the others
> to pour our voices on the tumbling
> waters— to throw our silence back into
> the trees.

The silence, Kubie thinks, is resounding; her protest is her poem. How astonishing, this grandmother thinks, is the power of poetry, stewed, as it is, of thought and meaning, symbol and sound, ink and paper. How amazing that it transcends the limits of time to strengthen our quaking hearts and rouse to courage our slumbering spirits.

What a generative force it is that can inspire itself, poet-to-poet, across races and generations. Across the living and the dead.

Memory

There are many things about 1968 1 do not tell Rachel Kubie. I do not tell her how my husband and I lived in a fourth-floor, walk-up apartment just six blocks from the cheeseburger-vindaloo diner. I do not tell her we were so poor, our entertainment was walking. Or how we pushed our baby up and down these very sidewalks until the rubber wore off his carriage's wheels. Nor do I tell her how happy we were, how confident that if we just kept pushing, our American dream would come true.

Baltimore is a strange town: it has the dogged deliberateness of the industrial Northeast and the measured probity of the genteel South. In Baltimore, the words, "civil" and "unrest" comprise an oxymoron. If one is to be civil—and one must be—one must be composed, self-assured, not out-of-control as "unrest" would imply. The words did not fit. So when America erupted into "civil unrest" following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Baltimore was slow to follow. Cleveland, Detroit, New York, Newark, a hundred cities convulsed, but in Baltimore the words fomented profound confusion, and the confusion caused fear, and the fear caused anger, and the anger fused into a nuclear dynamic.

Some said it was a churlish remark from a shopkeeper, others a racial slur from a policeman, but just as "civil unrest" in other cities was abating, in Baltimore a bottle flew, or maybe it was a brick, or maybe it was just a spark from molten anger. Whatever it was, when "civil unrest" came to Baltimore, the city exploded. The fire storm was so unquenchable, the city's social fabric has yet to heal more than three decades later.

I do not tell Rachel Kubie that riots are not what you think: the sun still shines; spring flowers still blossom; your baby's friends still come to play with him.

There are three of them, your baby's friends, two sisters and their little brother, black American children. Theyve been coming to your fourth-floor apartment for several months, so there's no special urgency when they come that Palm Sunday morning; they have not been driven by the beat of helicopter blades or the scream of sirens. No, they have not come for safety, but to do what children do—to play.

But you know they cannot stay, for if they stay, they will not be able to leave: the curfew begins before sundown. And you cannot have them there in your precious apartment with its French doors. You simply cannot. So you give them a bag of cookies and walk them down from the fourth to the first floor and out onto the street where a storm cloud has fallen from the sunshiny heavens and raises its feathery arms in supplication to its mother sky; it smells like smoke.

"Walk home," you tell your babfs three friends. "Take your cookies and go home."

They say nothing. They look at the cloud and then at you. Again: "Walk home."

They turn to the cloud. And go with their cookies. And you live with that memory for more than thirty years.

I'm haunted by Rachel Kubie's final question, the one where she leaned into me and asked, "Did they really iron their blouses before they went on those marches?"

But of course they did. We all ironed. I did it myself even on the morning I took a south-bound train from my parent's home in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and moved to Baltimore to take up my own life. And, yes, I'm certain those women in Alabama and Georgia, and Mississippi did it too, taking the damp, rolled-up blouse from a cool place where they'd stored it after taking down from the line and sprinkled it until they were ready to spread it on the board. I'm sure their mothers taught them what mine did: the back of the collar first. Then the inside of the placket. Then the inside of the cuffs. Then, the first strokes that actually showed, the ones that pressed the front and back. Finally came nosing the iron's point around the buttons, the steam rising and the scent of it mingled with starch, bluing and hot cotton. And last, the collar to frame a face.

The care, oh, the care they must have taken, those women of the marches. For the truncheons. For the hoses. For the dogs.

All for those blouses made of cotton, cotton whose fibers enslaved their parents, their grandparents. Two hundred years of bleeding hands and iron shackles to press another iron to it and hear the hiss of the steam so all could be wrinkle-free.

When I leave Rachel Kubie, I walk back to that old apartment building where I had held my baby and looked at a burning city. The building and its block look pretty much the same. Nothing has been bulldozed away. The row of stately old homes to the south is still there; so is the church to the north. Even the school on the southeast corner. I remember when the neighborhood built a playground in its schoolyard—such a radical idea, we all thought,

to pitch in, to do something for your community, to give something back.

Still, a generation has passed, and time has taken its toll. Just as I have, that apartment building seems to have sunken some. Or perhaps, as my eyes have dimmed, I see things more clearly. But the old neighborhood isn't as nearly as soigne as once I perceived it, nor are the French doors in the rear of our old apartment as elegant as I once thought.

On that Palm Sunday in 1968, after I sent his playmates away, I took my baby through those doors onto the little balcony. On that sunshiny April morning, eleven fires burned on Baltimore's west side. Who knows how many burned in the east?

What was I trying to show him? Something that he should remember? Something profound, yet unspoken like the message of the children in Rachel Kubie's poem who throw their "silence back onto the trees?" And did I want him to know that his mother gave his friends cookies for defense from helicopters slicing through smoke?

Yes, I wanted him to know all that. And more. Much more.

Now, everything I wanted for him—how to be industrious, dependable and self-reliant— has been fulfilled. From silver frames on my mantel piece, he and the brother, born two years after the riots, smile back at me with the eyes of confident young men. One a lawyer, one a banker, they have their piece of the American dream.

Moreover, they are loving husbands, caring fathers, devoted sons. Good citizens. They pay their taxes. And their mortgages. They keep abreast. And in touch. They plan for the future. Have good hearts.

How astonishing, I think, that so much was promised and so much fulfilled. That a journey beginning with two poor young parents and a baby carriage should end here, on a comfy couch in a house chockablock with tokens of accomplishment and continuity. Even my dearest affectations have been satisfied: I have yet another set of French doors, these overlooking a creek where mallards play shoot-the-rapids on winter mornings.

Patricia Schultheis

The French doors open off my library with its floor-to-ceiling bookcases and oak filing cabinets. There's even a dictionary in an antique stand. All a writer could ask. No poet like Rachel Kubie or Henry Dumas, I write news and feature articles and need to spread out.

There's usually a heap of notes and clippings to the left of my computer.

Among them now is a picture of Henry Dumas. Just a fuzzy print off the internet, it shows a slender, long-limbed man in dark slacks and a light sport coat over a plaid shirt. Perhaps, the weather may have been warm; maybe it was April. He is sitting on the curb of a bridge or a walkway—a guardrail of crisscrossed timbers is behind him. He looks not at the camera, but seems to be speaking to his little boy, David, who is lying at his feet. David is perhaps four or five and rests his chin in the palm of his hand and looks confidently into the camera. In his arms Henry holds a white bundle, his second son, the infant Michael. The caption gives the date as 1962. In that picture, Henry Dumas is twentyeight years old.

Like all photographs, the picture captures a speck of time, a sunny afternoon shared by a man and his boys. The sort of event, that, had the camera not recorded it, may have been forgotten, a single, unremarkable moment in the skein of a lifetime.

Who, I wonder, took the picture? Was it a friend?—in1962, Henry was at Rutgers, where he knew a large community of writers. More likely, it was his wife, Loretta. Having two sons of my own, I know that pictures of a woman's men are hard to come by: males move about too much. It's easy to imagine Loretta, her body canted into a C-shape to get the three of them in view, and her saying, "Hold still, David. Look at me. Smile." And Henry saying, "Listen to your mother, David. Hold still." And that's why, in Loretta's picture, if, indeed, it is hers, her husband is looking not at the camera, but at his oldest son sprawled at his feet. And there it is, a picture of two little boys and their father, who put down his poet's pen on an afternoon in the skein of his life just long enough for his wife to take his picture.

A.nd, here they are, in my library, so male in the way they command their space and speak to each other in the set of their muscles, the angle of their limbs. By the afternoon light streaming through my French doors, I can study that picture for an hour and never glean the least foreshadowing of the triple horrors that would follow.

Fact number one: Early in the morning of May 23, 1968, in the Lenox Avenue subway station, Henry Dumas was shot to death under circumstances that still remain unclear. Fact number two: Unable to accept the murky explanations surrounding his father's death, in 1987, David Dumas took his own life. Fact number three: Unable to live without his father and brother, in 1994, Michael Dumas also took his. These are the bare-bone facts.

When Henry Dumas's friend and mentor, Eugene Redmond tells me this, I reel. I am struck mute and nothing in the elegance of my home can assuage my sorrow nor dispel the sense of encroaching horror. I run for a sanctuary, seeking the surest refuge I know. I go to the Branch 14 of the public library.

Libraries bring out the best of us. I'm convinced of it. There's something about them that demands solemnity. The quiet allows each of us to hear our own thoughts. And there is a mutuality, too—I will be quiet so you can hear your own thoughts.—and you will be quiet so I can hear mine. Some unspoken truth is shared in libraries. In libraries, all borrowers are equal. You want a book? Have a book. I've never seen anyone leave a library without a look of bemusement at the ease of it all. No wonder Rachel Kubie nurtures her poet's soul amid the oaken shelves of a humanities department.

Branch Number 14 of Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Free Library is less than two miles from my home, but it might as well be in Rachel Kubie's "foreign country." As soon as I turn the corner, my neighborhood of picket fences and nineteenth century homes gives way to one more

modern. Four-square brick bungalows show their picture windows to a city golf course and keep their foundations hidden behind azaleas. But within a quarter mile past the golf course, the houses are larger and more dilapidated. Porches sag, and jerry-rigged stairs snake up to second stories. Closer yet to Branch 14, mean wire fences guard whatever yards remain, and the trashcans are so battered, they should climb in themselves.

When I turn onto the street where Branch 14 is, I enter an urban war zone. Once a leafy boulevard, now the trees tower over blocks where not a single house is without a scar. The prostitutes work the commuter trade coming and going. And, from the churn of the dealers on the curbs, even a grandmother can tell when a shipment has come in. The war zone is from the war we all lost in 1968.

After its "civil unrest," Baltimore hemorrhaged citizens. Over two hundred thousand, both black and white, fled to the suburbs. Without taxes to support itself, the city imploded, and its institutions deteriorated. Four summers ago, five library branches were closed. Too small, too old, too run down, said the library board.

Maybe they are right; I don't know. I only know I'm glad they spared Branch 14. One of the original branches when the library expanded citywide, Branch 14 is nearly one hundred years old. It sits on an irregularly shaped tract of urban greensward ringed by timid hedges. The surrounding trees bombard it with acorns.

Still, there is something elegant about Branch 14. Its bricks have a rich, amethyst shade, and its entryway is welcoming. It is a single story structure, more wide than deep, with large bays and stained glass windows at either end. The paint, the carpet, even the few armchairs, are fresh and clean, telling me, "Sit." And so I do, first with a volume about Mary Shelley in Italy. But her story is too tragic—she, too, lost two children. And then with The Joy of Cooking. But I have had enough of oxymorons—"Joy" and "Cooking," —I just don't buy it. So I check out a volume of short stories by Alice Munro and another by William Trevor. And only then do I return the two collections of Henry Dumas's poems that Rachel Kubie had sent to me from the central humanities department.

Out on the street again, an early September breeze chases away the lingering heat of summer. The breeze flutters the leaves of the trees surrounding Branch 14 and toys with my hair. To brush its strands from my eyes, I must shift my books, and my bag slips from my shoulder. To catch its strap, I move my head and glimpse the squirrel on the branch overhead. It chatters at a little boy in a yellow shirt going up the library steps. The boy looks at me for a moment then goes up the steps. Perhaps he thinks I made the chattering noise. Perhaps he will be a poet, I think.

"Emoyeni, passing, passing." Henry Dumas was right: we change everything we pass. And, so, in turn, are changed by it. By a young man sprawled on a subway platform. By a librarian who wrote a poem to him. By three children with a bag of cookies. By a boy in a yellow shirt on the steps of a library. All are changed. And all endure. In poems. In memory. In truths we know but cannot speak.

Open Letter to Henry Dumas

I bend over them as ifover a cup
Innumerable precious strokes
Here is the black tender news
Of our bloodstained youth

—Anna Akhmatova

I was born in 1968. It is a foreign country children come from. Shove your fingers in the soil & here it is the cool wet speech of hope.

& I tell you, Henry, ours are the acres gone black with dreams, rich with wild roots tangled under blind weather

For breakfast we eat hills by handfuls out from under ancient cities, and we learn by rote in school to answer:

'What is revolution?'
'It is the brute force of widowhood and want.'

We have poetry with dust and snow for lunch
& go without dinner.

I read your news. The ink came off on my hands—
Your columns announcing America.
I'd heard of heroes—I'd heard of great occasions— Do
you know it? We are a country & your country.